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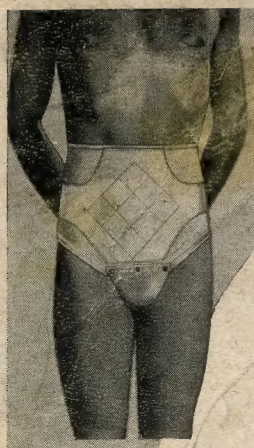
by ART LAWSON



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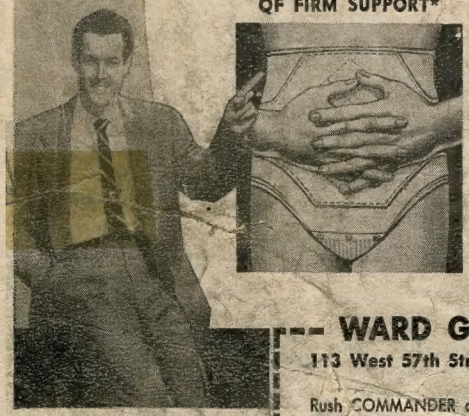

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NEXT ISSUE—PUBLISHED MARCH 27TH

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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

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Vol. 10 · April, 1953 · No. 4

Romantic Western Novelettes

KEEP AWAY FROM COWBOY KISSES! ..... *Art Lawson* 12
Lovely Laurie flirted with the Flying F's owner, but her heart ached for his range boss.

LOVERS RIDE THE DEADLINE ..... *Isabel Stewart Way* 88
Princess of a vast cattle empire, Kitty found both romance and fear along the Sun Dance trail.

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Sparkling Frontier Love Stories

LASSO THE MOON FOR LOVE! ..... *Val Gendron* 34
Nancy had to choose between dependable Phil and the reckless, red-haired giant.

BRIDGE OF CARDS ..... *McKay Henry* 44
Must her warm, Spanish heart go to the faithless Americano?

THE DAY THE ANGEL CAME ..... *Ben Frank* 59
Dippy and his boys were a-feudin' and a-cussin' when the angel came.

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A nester gal made herself at home on Frank's land and fenced off his heart.

SODBUSTER'S SWEETHEART ..... *Philip Ketchum* 81
The farmer and the cattleman fought not for riches, but for the love of the beautiful, young widow.

Features and Departments

PEN PARDS ..... *A Department* 6
If it's new friends you're seeking, here's the place to find them.

NEEDLE CIRCLE ..... *A Department* 43
Patterns for pretties all you cowgirls can make.

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional

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Pen Pards

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HELLO, all you folks! It's time to haul out your pen and ink once again, for here comes a grand herd of new pen pals with pleas of friendship that you'll find hard to resist. They come in all sizes and shapes to please every taste, and we're sure there's at least one of 'em in this batch who'll prove to be a true and lasting pal if you give him a chance. Take your pick, and send a letter on its way, today! You'll find the complete addresses included with each letter.

"Sunny"

Dear Editor:

Here are just a few lines from an old gal in Missouri who has plenty of time for pen pals.

As for myself—I am lazy, conceited, whistle off-key, and I adore onions. I know I have a million other faults but, disregarding them, I suppose you'd still call me human. I'm one of the many young teenagers struggling through high school. I have dark brown eyes and curly black hair. I am 5 ft. 3 in. tall and weigh 100 lbs.

SONYA ABERNATHIE
375 North Henderson
Cape Girardeau, Missouri

Linguist

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome man in my thirties, recently widowed, a veteran of World War II and of considerable travels. I have seen Africa, Europe, and South America, and can speak four diffierent languages. It will please me to have pen pards of both sexes to whom I can spill out both my bitter—and sweet—without mentioning my recent widowhood.

HARRY FOSTER
Box 621
St. Marees, Idaho

Attention Nurses!

Dear Editor:

I'm looking for a pen pal who really wants to be a pen pal. I've tried several times to get my plea printed but I didn't make it. Where there's a will there's a way! I do have a will, even if I can't say anything more for myself.

Although it would be better to leave this part out, I'll put in it nevertheless. I am 5 ft. 7 in. tall and weigh 130 lbs. I have red-brown hair and green eyes. I have a temper too, if I get mad. Maybe that's because I'm half Irish. I'm trying to get a nurse's degree. Then I want to join the Wacs or the Waves. People have said I look 20 and act 2—so there you are. Although I don't chew tobacco or smoke a pipe, I'm a hillbilly and I hate to wear shoes.

Come on, you people, and write. Especially servicemen between the ages of 17 to 27. I intend to be part of Uncle Sam's police force before long, and I would like to hear from girls interested in nursing and the services.

MISS TEVELA BRIGHT
Route #2
New Plymouth, Idaho

Sport-Loving Elaine

Dear Editor:

I love to make new friends as well as keep the old ones. I will be very happy if you will print this letter for me. I am a girl of 17 years, longing for my pen pals from anywhere in the United States. I live in the country about three miles from town and it gets very lonesome sometimes. I enjoy getting letters from boys and girls, and I also enjoy answering letters. I am 5 ft. 4 in. tall, and I have dark brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are swimming, fishing, horseback riding, basketball, and other sports.

I would like to hear from boys and girls, especially servicemen, from the ages of 16 to 25. I promise to answer all letters I receive and exchange snapshots.

ELAINE MOORE
Beattyville, Kentucky

(Continued on page 8)

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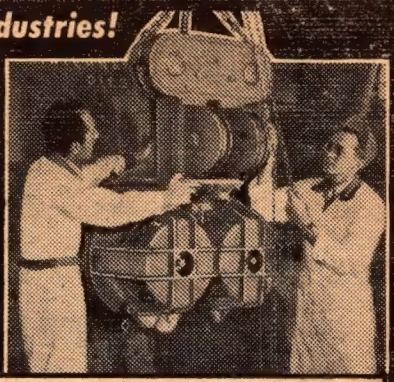

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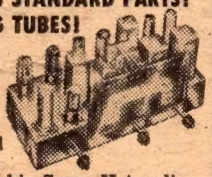

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(Continued from page 6)

Three Lonely Airmen

Dear Editor:

We are three extremely lonely airmen on duty in Alaska. I am writing this letter while my two buddies are sitting down beside me.

We are all in our early 20's, range from 5 to 6 ft. tall, and are as good looking as they come! We have one thing in common—we are all lonely and get little or no mail. We'd sincerely appreciate it if some nice girls would write to us and send pictures. We'll do the same. We prefer girls from the ages of 17 to 27. We promise to answer all letters so come on, girls, write to us lonely airmen.

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Likes People

Dear Editor:

I have been a faithful reader of your wonderful magazine for a long time. I have also found a wonderful pen pal through *Rangeland Love Stories*. My hobby is writing to people from the world over. I have never before sent my name to a pen pal club, but want to put my name in yours.

I am 16 years old, 5 ft. 4 in. tall, weigh 110 lbs. I have dark blonde hair and blue eyes and I go to high school. My ambition is to travel and see the world. My favorite interest is people, my favorite sport is skating, my favorite food is vegetable soup and my favorite kind of friend is one who is sincere, understanding and fun-loving. I live on a large dairy and beef farm. We grow cotton and tobacco, too.

I collect postcards, post marks, like to write short stories and poems. I will do my best to answer every letter and will also exchange snapshots.

PAULINE BENFIELD
Route One
Harmony, North Carolina

Diesel Engineer

Dear Editor:

Here's for a try at getting some pen pards who really are interested in becoming friends. I am 52 years of age, 6 ft. tall, blue eyes, real fair complexion. Oh, well, you know the hair is graying. Could have it dyed, couldn't I? I love reading, fishing, and hunting. Like to stay up late at night, and also love to get out to shows and places of amusement. I like Western and hillbilly music. Have traveled quite a bit as I like to go to distant places. I am employed as a locomotive engineer on a Diesel in the Blue Ridge mountains.

Come on, gals, let's take a ride. Would love to hear from all, and will exchange snapshots.

GEOFFREY C. KING
87 Langwell Ave.
Ashville, N. C.

Bill of the Air Force

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of *Rangeland Love Stories* and would enjoy corresponding with some pen pards. I am with the air force in the Far East, am 21 years of age, have dark brown hair and hazel eyes, weigh 160 lbs., and am 5 ft. 10 in., tall.

I am interested in sports, movies, traveling, meeting new people, and bowling. I will answer all letters. So if some pen pards would enjoy writing and receiving letters, drop me a line.

A1/C WILLIAM R. PECK
AF 27872700
6351st M & S Sq.
Box 31, APO 235
C/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

Wyoming Jody

Dear Editor:

Could you possibly find a spot for a Wyoming gal who's badly in need of letters to take her mind off other things.

I'm 16 years of age and have long, reddish-blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm 5 ft. 4½ in. and weigh 107 lbs. I have a slender build.

I enjoy horseback riding, skating, swimming, fishing, baseball, basketball, and football. I am a cheerleader for our wranglers at Shoshoni High School. I love and do quite a bit of dancing. I sing also, and my ambition is to be a singer.

I love to write, and promise to answer all letters received as soon as I can. I'll exchange photos with anyone who wishes. I'd like to hear from all girls around my age and males from the ages of 16 to 24, especially lonesome or hospitalized soldiers. So, come on and help a lonesome gal.

JODY SPINT
Riverton, Wyoming

A Couple of Ranch Girls

Dear Editor:

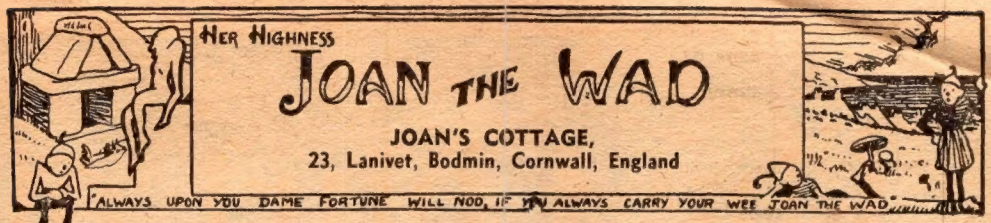
Here are a couple of gals who are hard up for pen pards. We would like to hear from anybody who can sling a little ink on a scrap of paper. We fancy soldiers and cowboys.

Anna Marie is 16 years old, 5 ft. 2 in., tall, with blue eyes and brown hair.

Ellen is 5 ft. 6 in. tall, with blue eyes, brown hair and is 17 years old.

We both enjoy writing and, better yet, like to get letters from everywhere. We like dancing, movies, and most all sports. We both live on ranches close to a pretty small town. Small towns in Idaho can get pretty dull sometimes.

(Continued on page 112)


HER HIGHNESS
JOAN THE WAD
JOAN'S COTTAGE,
23, Lanivet, Bodmin, Cornwall, England
ALWAYS UPON YOU DAME FORTUNE WILL NOD, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD.

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won $5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his $5,600 he gave me $280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951:

Since receiving Joan the Wad . . . my husband's health has improved 100%.

Mr. JONES of Cheltenham, says, 1951:

Send me J. O'Lantern. Since receiving Joan the Wad have won two 1st prizes in Crosswords . . . *John Bull* and *Sunday Chronicle*.

SEND NOW

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Keep Away From Cowboy Kisses!

How could lovely, reckless Laurie keep up her dangerous masquerade of love with the dashing owner of the Flying F, when her heart was crying aloud for his handsome range boss?

By Art Lawson

A Western Love Novelette

LAURIE BURNS stepped down from her stallion, Rajah, at the rack fronting the Full Noggin Saloon. She knew that every man within sight was staring at her, licking his lips most likely, and building up a nice little dream. But Laurie didn't give it any thought today. She had half a mind to let down her dark hair, do a

She grabbed him by the ears and gave him a sound kiss.

Lady Godiva along the main street, and give the old fools a real treat. For Laurie was just a nester girl, with everything she owned in the saddle bags aboard the half-wild stallion she had trapped up at Horse Canyon, and a brother in jail for rustling. Laurie was looked down upon; she knew it, and she didn't give a high-binding damn.

A man squatting against the saloon wall whittling, rolled his eyes; another just gaped. A couple of women across the street wrinkled their noses as if a dead skunk had been tossed into the street. Laurie ignored them all. She tied her stallion good and tight to the hitch rack because he was not yet broken to stand alone. He was no runty broomtail, but a throwback to the sleek Arabians that had gotten away from Cortez many centuries ago. White, with a black star on his forehead; as many men there wanted that horse as wanted Laurie.

"Take it easy, Rajah," she warned. Laurie didn't know that Rajahs were not Arabians, but that would have made no difference to her anyway because she liked the name. The stallion pawed at the ground and whinnied when Laurie stepped up onto the boardwalk. The whittler had straightened; he pawed at the ground, too. Laurie glared at him, blue fire in her greenish eyes. "Let's hear *you* whinny," she said, "and I'll fetch you a nosebag of oats.

The man turned red, his knife slipped and spoiled the chain he was whittling. The rest of the men hanging around began to laugh; a laugh that started as a snicker and grew into a roar. The ladies across the street lifted their noses a little higher. Laurie banged through the slatted doors of the Full Noggin, nearly ripping them from their hinges. She kicked up sawdust as she strode across the floor toward the bar. Men, more men staring at her—wondering and wishing. Hank, the barman, his face white as a catfish's belly, began to turn pink.

"There's a family entrance, Laurie—" he began.

"I don't have a family," she snapped at him, "except what's in jail. And I'm not Laurie to you, or to anybody else. I'm Miss Burns."

It sounded silly to her after she had said it, but apparently not so to the men. Laurie was a girl the women hated, and only the toughest of men dared hope that their dreams of her might come true. She was a sturdy girl who had ridden with boys and men since she was a baby, yet she was all woman—rounded hips, slim waist, and smooth arms and legs that only hinted at their strength and suppleness. It took a big man, a strong man, to measure up to Laurie. Hank was not one of these.

"Okay, Miss Burns," he said. "So you're sore because your brother got caught rustling. So you bang in here—"

She reached across the bar so swiftly that Hank had no chance to duck. He habitually wore a black bow tie and a white shirt; she had no way of knowing that the tie was on an elastic. She grabbed it to haul him over the bar and teach him a lesson. The elastic stretched—the barkeeper stayed where he was. She let go of the tie and it slapped sharply against Hank's Adam's apple. Tears welled in his eyes. One of the men guffawed. Then, suddenly, they were all silent, while the barkeeper was swallowing to get his breath back.

Laurie gave him no chance to recover, even though she could hardly keep from laughing. "I hear the Flying F asked you to hire a round-up cook for them," she said sharply. He swallowed again and backed as far away from her as he could go. "Okay," Laurie said, "and thanks for the job. Now, where are the papers?"

Hank shook his bald head. Breath wheezed through his injured throat.

"Can't do it," he said.

She picked up the nearest tumbler and flung it at him, and he ducked just in time. The glass smashed a bottle of whiskey on the back bar. Glass tinkled on the floor. Liquor trickled down to form a little pool

cotton fields. Over toward New Mexico, they ran sheep, though they never mentioned it. The boss had his eye on the dollar—while the ramrod nursed along the men and animals.

Laurie had the same feeling for Jim that the stallion had—here was a man you could trust, if Laurie or her wild horse could trust any man.

"Hyah, Jim," she said. She smiled straight at him and waited for him to melt down or drop dead. He did neither.

"I'm sorry as hell about your brother, Laurie," he said. "I mean it!"

"You weren't on the jury," she said.

Jim Seaton had kissed her once, and Laurie had never forgotten it. Before the outbreak of trouble, the Flying F had thrown a big barbecue. Somehow, Jim and Laurie had been jostled together, then left alone for a moment. She had not discouraged him, because she was vaguely hoping that something like that might happen. She remembered now how she had been wearing the green dress with the off-shoulder neckline that tended to slip even more daringly when she danced. He had been looking at the hollow of her throat, as if he had no control of his eyes; then, suddenly he had kissed her.

For a moment, Laurie had clung to him, her lips soft against his hard mouth, their bodies fused, hers firm and warm, his hard-muscled and broad-shouldered. He was young to be the ramrod of the Flying F—but not so young as he had acted after that impetuous kiss.

She would never forget how she had broken away from him, and how shaken he was; even his hands had trembled. Then she had laughed in his face, flounced away, and joined the crowd at the barbecue pits, while her lips glowed and her heart hummed. She hadn't seen him alone since.

Now she wondered if he remembered it—and abruptly knew that he did. It was almost like seeing a tableau of that night in his eyes.

"Light," Jim said in his husky voice. "Supper's about ready."

LAURIE slipped her right foot out of the stirrup, swung her lovely, long leg over the cantle, and stepped down to the hard-packed caliche of the front yard. This ranch had been born when there was still danger of Indian attacks. The squat adobe house with the narrow windows that were hardly more than gunports, had been set in the open, where hostiles could find no cover. Laurie moved up close to Jim, taking over the horse's headstall from him.

"Mighty pleasant evening," she drawled.

His brown eyes slitted. He went straight to the point of what he thought had brought her here. "I can't do anything for your brother, Laurie. The jury declared him guilty and the jury's the law."

Her full, inviting lips curled. "The jury didn't declare *me* guilty," she said sharply, "but everyone else has. I'm tired of it; let's hear no more about it."

"Then, what do you want?" he asked shortly.

She was in no hurry to tell him. She reached into the pocket of her white shirt, digging deeply, and fished out a note from Hank, the barman of the Full Noggin. Jim read it slowly and then tore it up.

"What did you do to Hank?" he almost shouted it. "He knew I wouldn't take you on as round-up cook—or anything else."

She had expected a blast of some nature. "He was authorized to hire a cook for the Flying F," she purred, "and he hired me. You're not going to back out on your agent, are you?"

Jim scowled at her for a long time. Legally, the girl was hired and there was nothing he could do about it. The Flying F had to pay for her job until the end of the round-up, but the ranch didn't have to use her. The ramrod stared straight into the greenish-blue eyes and a tingling feeling began at the base of Laurie's skull.

under the sawdust; the smell of it was suddenly sharp in the room. Hank's eyes had shrunk up, tiny as split peas.

"It won't get you anywhere, Laurie," he said. "They won't keep you out there."

"They'll keep me," she said. "You fill out the papers. I'll take care of the rest. The name is *Miss* Laura Burns."

THE BARTENDER took a quick drink, something he almost never indulged in. Today he needed it. He shrugged beefy shoulders. This girl in the white shirt and blue levis was half devil and half wildcat. If she could cook anything more than a mess of trouble, Hank would be surprised. Keeping away from her, he got a pad from under the bar and wrote upon it in a very elegant Spencerian hand.

To: Jim Seaton,
Flying F Ranch.

Sir,

This is to advise you that I have today hired, according to your orders, a round-up cook, viz, Miss Laura Burns.

Very truly yours,
Henry J. Osterbanch.

He tossed it onto the bar. Laurie read it; then she smiled at him, a truly dazzling smile that turned his backbone into mush and made every man there forget his mother, sweetheart, and wife.

"Give the boys a drink on me," she said. "Take it out of my first month's pay, and thanks very much Hank, dear."

She switched those hips and strode out of there, kicking the sawdust high. When the swinging doors slatted behind her, a purple fog filled the Full Noggin to overflowing, a fog compounded of illicit dreams and furtive hopes that would never come true.

She rode fast, straight for the headquarters of the Flying F. Give this stallion, Rajah, his head and nothing short of a thoroughbred trained to the race track could catch up with him. She had been lucky in capturing him. It was part luck, anyway, since just about everyone else at this end of the state had tried to rope him at one time or another. But Laurie had helped her luck come out right. After she had lost her miserable herd of cattle, all her horses, and most of her other belongings, trying to keep her brother out of jail, she had started off at the bottom again. Rajah, accustomed to men coming after him on horseback and in large groups, did not immediately recognize the danger of a lone girl on foot. So she caught him, and she was one step back up the ladder she had been kicked off. This time she was not going to stop until she reached the top. She figured on marrying Lou Falcon, owner of the Flying F—and Laurie knew she could do it.

The Flying F was at the head of Turkey Canyon. Summers, the cattle ranged on the Llano Estacado with its endless sea of short grass. Winters, the cows were drifted down into the Palo Pinto, Turkey Canyon, and others along the Canadian River where they would be sheltered from the endless winds; so now there was hardly any cattle at all along the lush meadows and swamps leading up to Turkey Canyon.

The sun had vanished over the rimrock and lights gleamed in the ranchhouse when Laurie rode in. A couple of yard dogs barked good-naturedly. The stallion spooked at them. A man ran from the adobe house, grasped the headstall of Rajah and steadied him. When the stallion quieted, the man glanced up at her.

"Laurie!" he said.

This was Jim Seaton, a ruddy man with astonishingly pale hair now that he was caught with his Stetson off. Jim Seaton, tall and quick as a timber wolf, was the ramrod of the Flying F; he handled the men and stock. His boss, the owner, Lou Falcon, took care of the business, and more, because his enterprises were many. The Falcons were a power in the Panhandle, with big shares in banks and railroads. They had come from South Texas originally where they still owned plantations and

"Hi!" she greeted him cheerfully. "I'm the new round-up cook. Jim told me to bunk down here until I get the chuck wagon on the road. Any empty beds?"

The change from the outside glare to the duskiness of the bunkhouse had been so marked that it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. With a start, she recognized the cowboy sitting on the edge of his bunk plaiting a bridle.

"You?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Maybe I ought to ask you the same thing." He grinned crookedly. Chuck Savin had been badly slashed across the cheek in a knife battle. Even when he tried to look pleasant, he could not do so convincingly. "Looks like everyone from the Strip is coming to work on the Flying F or the Pothook."

"The Strip" was a narrow band of small ranchers and nesters that divided the Flying F from the huge Pothook some ten miles to the east. For many years, there had been talk of those two big outfits getting together to squeeze out the little spreads in between. Laurie had interpreted the jailing of her brother as one of the moves toward liquidating all but the two biggest outfits in the area.

"Who else is here?" she asked.

"Me and you," he said. "Red O'Toole's thinking of moving to the Pothook. Who's next, I wouldn't know. But they'll get all of us sooner or later. We can't fight them now that they are working together."

Chuck Savin was a man born to quit, Laurie believed. Though he had been a neighbor of hers, she had never gotten to know him too well. Like most men when they got too close to Laurie on a moonlit night, Chuck Savin had become a little too eager once. She had smashed his instep so hard with her sharp heel that he had limped around for weeks, and thereafter left her strictly alone. He stood up now and crossed the floor. Chuck was no taller than Laurie, but somehow she could make any man look smaller near her than he was actually.

"When they got your brother, Hal, I saw the writing on the wall, as they say," Chuck told her. "I gave up. I should have come over here long ago."

Laurie didn't trust this man, though she had no real cause for her attitude. The two cowboys who had been working in the yard found an excuse to close in on the bunkhouse. They were new to her, imported for the roundup—or for the battle that seemed to be looming over the range. They stared at her in speculation. This was something too amazing to be true, a girl like Laurie riding up on a stallion like Rajah, and announcing that she had come to stay in the bunkhouse. Laurie could read their minds as if their thoughts were written big and clear on a blackboard. She glanced over her shoulder and laughed.

"Evening, boys," she greeted. "I've come to join you. Just treat me like you would any other new hand. Now, where's an empty bunk I could have?"

The new men were struck silent by this wonderful event. Chuck Savin laughed lustily, remembering, no doubt, how Laurie had nearly crippled him last spring.

"The bunk above mine is empty," he said. "You kin have it. Here— lemme help with your outfit."

The bunks were built along one wall of the long adobe structure, and were wide enough for two men in emergencies. More than half were empty now because the men had already ridden out onto the range to mend fences, prepare temporary corrals, and get ready for the round-up. Laurie let Chuck toss her outfit up onto the bunk above the one where he had been sitting. Then she went out back to the pump and line-up of washbowls. Rolling up her sleeves, she unbuttoned her shirt and began to wash. She scrubbed her face until it shone. She knew that her audience was growing, and she enjoyed it very much. She had started to use the washcloth on her neck, when she was grasped from the

Something had broken loose within her, and her knees began to shake. She had told herself more than a hundred times that she hated Jim Seaton. But now, alone with him in the Flying F ranch yard, she began to be confused.

"Okay," he said finally. "I won't go back on Hank, even if he did make a fool of himself. I reckon he's not the first man you've dazzled into doing what you want—or the last!" He waited a moment for her to put up an argument. But for once, she kept her lovely mouth shut. "Take your warbag down to the bunkhouse. You can have any bunk that's empty. Tonight we get the chuck wagon ready; we're pulling out for the range tomorrow."

Assigned to the bunkhouse! Laurie thought as she let her full, lower lip droop in a pout. He had pulled a fast one on her, sending her down there with the men. She smiled crookedly at him.

"Yes, sir!" she said. "I'll get that chuck wagon ready."

She turned away, and he called sharply to her, "Just a minute, Burns." She wheeled. He glared at her as he had that night just before he kissed her, a sort of hungry, yearning expression that reminded her of a tomcat she had owned who squatted down and switched his tail whenever a tabby came by. Laurie dug her heels into the packed caliche and waited for him. He bit down hard for a moment. His knuckles shone white, and his eyeballs glistened. "We're a hard-working crew," he told her. "I may be stuck with you, since Hank hired you—but I don't have to keep you if you don't do your job. Savvy?"

"I savvy," she said shortly, "and just try to make it tough enough to break me, buster."

She walked right up to him, grabbed him by the ears, and gave him a hot, damp kiss.

"Thanks for the cheery welcome, boss!" she said.

He stood up to her, acting as if there was nothing unusual in being kissed by a newly-hired round-up cook, but his legs had begun to weaken and there was a sudden surge to his heartbeat and a spasmodic tautening of his muscles. Laurie kissed him again, a little more warmly, until he was mighty close to the breaking point. Then skillfully, she twisted away and broke from him. Out of reach of the Flying F ramrod, she laughed again in his face.

But her laughter was short-lived. There was motion in the big entryway of the low, long adobe structure that made up the headquarters of the Flying F. Lou Falcon had come out; and Lou had seen everything. Bright spots of red stained the high points of Laurie's cheeks. Lou was the prize package she had come out here to collect, and she sure enough had started off wrong. She flashed her great, jade eyes at him.

"Evening, Laurie," he said coldly. "Jim—I want to talk to you."

The corners of the ramrod's eyes crinkled. His lips were hard, flat. Laurie thought he was going to say something. Instead, he turned his back on her and walked into the house on the heels of his boss.

CHAPTER TWO

Bait for the Trap

THERE was only one man in the bunkhouse when Laurie led Rajah over and unslung the saddlebags. Two other cowboys in the yard watched her with incredulous, avid eyes. They had often talked of smuggling a girl into the bunkhouse, but had never done so, and one was moving herself in. Here was Laurie Burns, the hot-blooded litle squatter whose brother was in the jug for rustling Flying F cattle, taking her saddlebags into the bunkhouse.

The men returned to their chores shaken. The cowpuncher in the bunkhouse stared dumfounded at the girl silhouetted in the doorway.

rear and an angry man swung her around.

Laurie stood frozen, clinging to the dripping cloth and staring at the man. It was Lou Falcon, big, dark, and looking like a hawk. Celia Jackson had come down from the house. She had inherited the Pothook, and rumor had it that she and Lou would marry some day to combine their fortunes and the two big ranches. It was this possible marriage that Laurie had sworn to break up.

Lou Falcon was as upset as a bob-tailed bull in fly time. His fingers dug deeply into Laurie's shoulder. She looked him straight in the eyes and flashed a melting smile at him. She knew then, definitely, that she hated him. She knew that she was going to do everything she could to marry him. Then she'd ruin him—and Celia, too!

LOU HAD nothing to say as he hauled Laurie up to the Flying F ranchhouse. He did not let go of her until they were in the big main house that was still more of a fort than living quarters. Then he thrust her away brusquely. With her right hand, she massaged her aching arm and, though the smile quirked up at the corners, she never lost it. Calculation had entered Celia Johnson's soft, brown eyes. Jim Seaton was in the big room, too, angry and sullen. It was obvious to Laurie that the men had been fighting.

"Of all the asinine things to do," Lou roared.

Jim snapped back at Lou, "I didn't think she'd go down there." His dark eyes flashed to Laurie for a moment. "Okay—I tried a bluff. You called me on it. You can stay with Celia tonight."

"I didn't mind the bunkhouse at all," Laurie said sweetly. "The men were so kind to me."

Lou Falcon practically snarled at her. "Sit down, Laurie," he ordered. He turned his hawk-like glance on Celia and Jim. "Didn't you two want to look over that light wagon down in the shed and hunt up some tarps? Why don't you do it now?"

"Why, sure!" Jim's eyebrows shot up. The suspicion that had been growing in Laurie expanded rapidly. Celia was really a beautiful girl in her own way; blonde and cool, whereas Laurie was dark and full of fire. Celia's curved body was opulent from easy living—Laurie's was lithe as a dancer's. "I was thinking that Celia and I had better get after that job, Lou," Jim added.

The blonde girl balked a moment, then after a glance at Lou Falcon she took Jim's arm and held onto it tightly.

"Come on, Jim, honey," she cooed.

A lump caught in Laurie's throat. It could not have been caused by jealousy since she didn't want any part of Jim Seaton. She didn't know what it was. Lou stared balefully after them as they went out arm in arm, with Celia's long skirt switching about her ankles and her hips enticingly. They were out of sight before either man or girl spoke.

Laurie slanted her greenish eyes at the owner of the Flying F. "Why'd you kick them out?" she asked. "Especially since you don't like seeing them together?"

"I'm not worried about them," Lou said shortly. "Jim knows too much about cows to be taken in by her, and she knows too much about money to take a chance on a hired hand." He glared at Laurie. "What did you come up here for, to cause trouble?"

"I came because I needed a job," she said. "You ought to know that. You worked hard enough to break me."

"You're a fool like the rest," he said sourly. "Your brother was caught rustling Flying F beef. I can't afford to have my cattle stolen wholesale, so I did what I had to do. If you hadn't fought it, you'd still have your mangy, little spread."

If she'd had a knife at the moment, she would gladly have shoved it in between his ribs and twisted it. Instead, she used a weapon far more deadly. She glanced at

him with bright, round eyes and curved a rich, warm mouth that begged for masculine attention.

"I learned my lesson," she said, her lips arching. "Maybe my brother learned his. I don't know. I'm out here to work, Lou; to do a job."

He stared at her for another moment. Then he swore sharply. "Damn you, Laurie!" and grasped the girl by her upper arms. For a moment he held her away; then, with a sudden, fierce urgency, his lips crushed down on hers. This man was all steel and rawhide. There was no soft spot in his heart or gentleness in him, that would leave him trembling as Jim Seaton had been after he kissed her. Lou knew what he wanted, and he knew that the road to his desire was narrow and straight. She knew what she wanted, too.

She pressed her mouth against his with a simulation of abandon, and clinging to him, she dug her fingernails into his back. He had forced her up against the long refectory table and was holding her tightly to him. Then, she could no longer pretend and turned her head away. She felt his lips on her ear, and his breath on the back of her neck.

"No—" she cried. "No!"

"You asked for it!" he snarled.

She slammed her fist into his throat. He laughed, unhurt, and let go of her. Falling away, leaning against the big table, thinking maybe she had overdone her act, Laurie rubbed her hand across her bruised mouth.

"Next time you come after me," she threatened, "I'll have a knife."

He laughed at her. She had never been laughed at like this before. Usually, Laurie was the one who did the laughing.

"Before this round-up is over, you'll come crawling after me." His sharp, black eyes mocked her.

Hate set fire to her green eyes. She struggled to cover up her real feelings for him, and her smile was shaky. She was as hollow inside as a cracked rattle.

"I don't crawl," she said. "If you want me—you'll have to be man enough."

"I'm man enough," he said, and started toward her again.

CHAPTER THREE

Woman Trouble Begins

OLD BILLY Batts beat on his triangle until the din filled the ranch yard and echoed off the walls of the canyon. He was the regular cook of the Flying F, but too old now to ride out on the round-up. He took a good, deep breath and let go with a bellow.

"Come an' get it! Come an' get it!"

Lou Falcon stopped inches from Laurie who had not retreated as much as an inch. Her smile was sardonic and mocking. Lou's breath whistled, while the muscles of his lean cheeks twitched.

"That old son of a gun had the kitchen door open," he said. Then he laughed, as if the joke was on himself. "Did me a favor, I reckon," he went on. "Just about to stick my head into the lion's mouth. I'll have to give the old boy a bonus of a jug of rum when we leave for the round-up."

He took her down to the cookshack. Laurie's tenseness had been replaced by watchful waiting. She had hit Lou where it hurt, and she knew that he would not let the matter lie. Yet, she was determined to hold him off just enough so that he would be driven to marry her. Then she'd loot him—and good!

They were on a false, easy-talking basis by the time they got down to supper. The long table was half filled. Jim Seaton and Celia Jackson had gotten there ahead of them. All together, there were only ten cowboys out of four dozen or more who worked for the Flying F at round-up time. The rest would not come in until the branding and cutting was completed. Then they'd gather for a big barbecue and rodeo before the temporary hands drifted on to spend

the winter in Mexico, or hanging around some cowtown where they might pick up odd jobs.

The boys, accustomed to nothing but men around the Flying F, were nervous in the presence of two such girls. They stood around, twisting the brims of their hats until the girls were seated, surreptitiously watching them settle themselves on the hard benches. Chuck Savin had told the story of how Laurie had come down to pick out a bunk and had scrubbed up at the washstand. It was a snug, little secret that each man cuddled to himself and interpreted to his own benefit.

They ate rapidly, silently, leaving the girls far behind. Jim Seaton noticed that the men were finished so he told them they could leave. They left the mess hall in a hurry to hang around the yard until the girls came out. The hunger in these men was deep, and it was more than a hunger for food or excitement. Chuck Savin was the last to go. He had taken on stature because he had known Laurie and had been a neighbor of hers before giving up his ranch.

Laurie chose to ignore Chuck's last, intimate glance before he followed the others into the purple evening. Jim Seaton was in a sullen frame of mind, but both Celia and Lou Falcon took this meal as an everyday affair. Celia was especially lively.

"That wagon is just the thing, Lou," she bubbled. "Jim figures we could put two bunks in it easy, and a place for a dressing table and a washstand. It will be a real adventure, Lou."

Lou Falcon explained what was up. "When Celia heard that you were going out on the round-up, she wanted to go, too," Lou told Laurie. "Been on the Pothook all her life and never saw a round-up. So we're fixing the wagon for the two of you to live in."

Laurie wondered if Celia's desire to see the round-up was her real cause for going along. She guessed that the blonde really wanted to keep her eye on Lou.

Gruffly, Jim Seaton shoved back his chair and stood up. "I'll put a couple of boys on the wagon to build in the bunks and stuff. Maybe you better go down and tell them what you want, Celia. Laurie, you hired on as cook. You'll come with me and Billy Batts to get the chuck wagon ready."

Lou glanced up at Jim, not hiding the laughter in his eyes. Lou had not been fooled a bit by his ramrod's orders; but, since he was in the habit of letting Jim run things, he did not interfere. He only asked a question.

"What do you want me to do, Jim?" he was sarcastic.

"You can count your money, for all I care," Jim said sourly, "and stuff it in a rat hole. "Or," and he let it sink in for a moment, "you can take the ladies on a hunting trip until the round-up is over. There's trouble enough on the range, without a pair of dolls making it worse."

"I like doll trouble," Lou said, and stood up.

They worked like stevedores that night, loading the chuck wagon by the light of lanterns, checking over the chuck box to make sure everything was on hand. When Laurie had gone on the round-up before, she and her brother had toted their supplies on mules. This was an entirely different sort of operation; three or four dozen men would be eating from this chuck wagon before the roundup was finished. They wouldn't eat light, either, because this was the toughest job of the whole season. Billy Batts said he might have to send out extra vittles if they ran into difficulties, and well they might. Since the trouble that landed Hal Burns in jail, herds had been stampeded all over the place, fences had been cut, and calfs had been separated from their mothers. In addition to the expected strays and mavericks, the many small herds of the squatters had become mixed up with the two big outfits.

By midnight, none of this mattered to

Laurie. She had seen Lou Falcon down at the bunk wagon with Celia, both taking it easy while Lou helped direct the setting up of the mobile bedroom for the girls. Later on, they were on the patio having a drink and Lou smoked a long, black cigar. Then, they walked down toward the creek in the moonlight and were gone for what seemed to be hours.

All of this only made Laurie work harder; and when they were finished, she wanted to do nothing but tumble into bed. Jim Seaton had treated her strictly as an employee and had otherwise left her alone. Now he went with her to the house, where a night light was burning.

"I'm going to get me a good, stiff snort of drinkin' likker," he said. "You worked like a man, Laurie. You did a good job. I'll get you a drink, too, if you want one."

She dropped into the great couch before the stone and adobe fireplace where one red eye of a coal winked at her.

"No, thanks," she said. "All I need is a bath and twelve days sleep. Or maybe the sleep first."

He poured himself a drink, and brought her a cup of hot tea. She sipped at it, not really wanting it. Jim came over to sit beside her after awhile, taking with him his second drink. He didn't have much to say right now, but just stared at the dead fire. It was pleasant, though, having a man by your side, Laurie thought.

JIM SEATON finally got up his nerve, after clearing his throat a half dozen times.

"Wrecking Lou's life won't do you no good," he said abruptly. "It won't get your brother out of jail."

Having gotten it out, he grabbed another drink. The soft fog that had surrounded the girl immediately blew away. Laurie sat up stiffly, wide awake.

"Who gave you the idea I was trying to wreck anybody's life?" she demanded.

"I'm not blind," Jim said. "You don't love him. You blame him for ruining you. You're trying to get back at him."

"You've been out in the sun too long today," Laurie said. "I just needed a job—and this is the one I got. Keep your silly ideas to yourself."

Laurie jumped to her feet. She stretched her arms high above her head and her half-unbuttoned shirt and levis hugged her lovely figure. The man before her had never forgotten the time he had kissed her, or the derision of the girl afterwards. He jumped up, too, filled with anger because he was absolutely right about Laurie's intentions. Her arms dropped when he took her by the shoulders to shake her.

"You can't go through with this, Laurie," he said. "I won't let you."

"You can't stop me." Her voice was husky and hot. "Nobody can keep me from what I have to do. Now, leave go of me!"

He stopped shaking her. His eyes held hers.

"You're acting as if the devil had got into you," he said softly.

"Maybe it did," she said shortly.

She took his hands from her shoulders. Then she moved up close to him, until she was hardly a foot away. Still she did not touch him, nor did he raise his hands again. The expression on his face was one of utter sadness. For a moment, compassion wrung Laurie's heart but she steeled herself against it. She knew that he was close to the breaking point, and it suited her that he should be so. She lifted her chin a little and moved her face closer to him, just to torture him.

"I'm the round-up cook," she announced. "If you ever have any complaints about my vittles or my service, come see me. But I'll do what I damn well please on my own time."

He lifted a hand, as if to plead with her again, but she couldn't be stopped. She slapped the hand down and shoved past him, deliberately brushing against him. She left him there alone as she sought the room where Celia Jackson was bedded down.

Celia was sitting on the side of her bed waiting for Laurie. In a high-necked, white cotton nightgown, Celia looked almost childish, except for the fact that she was smoking a cigarette. There was a decanter of brandy on the night table and two small glasses. One of these had been used.

"Help yourself," Celia offered.

The people around this ranch sure were generous with their liquor, Laurie thought.

"No, thanks," she turned it down. "What a day!" She slumped on the wide bed. Celia watched her with curiously bold eyes. She seemed about to make a comment, but Laurie cut her short. "I sure could use a bath!"

"This spread is primitive," Celia complained, "but there's a pail of water in the washstand."

That was better than nothing. Laurie stripped. She stood in the basin while sponging herself off. It felt good and it eased her frazzled nerves. Wistfully, she wished for home, where she had rigged up a shower connected to the windmill. After drying herself off, she rummaged through the saddle bags that had been brought to the room, and dug out an old, faded shirt that had been her brother's. Its sleeves cut short, it made a very respectable nightgown, with its tails hanging down to her knees. Laurie had never owned a real nightgown. Even as a baby, she had only had flour sacks. Nor was she ashamed of it here before this well-rounded girl whose ranch was the second biggest in this part of the state.

Buttoning up the shirt, she grinned at Celia.

"This is a good chance for you to learn how the other half lives," she said. "This is the best nightgown I've ever owned."

Celia nibbled at her full, lower lip.

"God, Laurie," she said. "You always acted as if you owned the world. You never acted like a girl who has to wear her brother's cast-off shirts to bed."

"I do own the world," Laurie declared, looking the blonde right in the eyes. "I'm just setting out to collect it."

Celia brightened. "You mean you're after *him?* Not the job?"

"Him?" Laurie cried. "There isn't a *him* in the world that I'd lift a hand to catch." She yawned. "Which side of the bed do I sleep on?"

"You better take the outside," Celia said.

Laurie stretched out, and was sound asleep instantly, even before Celia finished her cigarette and downed the rest of her drink. Celia stared at Laurie for a moment. Pure venom filled the soft, brown eyes before she doused the light.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gathering for Revenge

LAURIE BURNS took the six-mule hitch out of the ranch yard before sun-up the next morning. Billy Batts was there to see her off. The old man's pale eyes glistened and his horse-tail mustaches waggled.

"Don't let them get your goat, girl," he warned. "The toughest job on the round-up is cooking. I don't know much of nothin', girl, but one thing I learned long ago is you git there faster if you let the other feller do the pushing."

"Thanks," Laurie said. "I'll let him."

She cussed the mules into movement. The heavy chuck wagon rumbled after them, and behind it followed the trailer, a lighter wagon loaded with the cowpuncher's bedrolls, spare tarps, and a half cord of firewood. Where they were going, even the buffalo chips had been burned up long ago. Trailing after Laurie, was Celia Jackson in the bed wagon that had already been nicknamed "the Harem." Like an outrider, Lou Falcon rode with them to give the girls his attention and to guide them to the gathering grounds. This was north of the river, a shallow, wide valley in the broken country that had been used for many

years because it was a natural holding-ground with plenty of water and grass. With them was Chuck Savin, in charge of the remuda, helped by two other cowboys. The rest of the outfit had gone on ahead.

It was after dark when the weary mules, all the kick and orneriness taken out of them for the time being, slogged down a gentle slope into the valley. Jim Seaton had already built a fire. A freshly-butchered yearling beef hung on a tripod to cool. Though she was exhausted, Laurie knew that the men were waiting for their supper. She tumbled out of the chuck wagon and staggered around for a few moments to bring life back into her legs. Then, with the help of a couple of cowboys who had been assigned to assist her, she put up the big dutch ovens, broke out beans that had been cooked by Billy Batts the day before, set sour-dough biscuits to baking. Almost before she knew it, supper was ready.

She had no memory whatsover of boiling the coffee, but there it was. And there, too, Jim Seaton was watching her from the corners of his eyes. Celia had tried to help, but had only gotten underfoot and had retired early from the scene.

Laurie was too tired to eat. She gulped a couple of swallows of supper, gnawed half a biscuit, and scrawled into the Harem to stretch out for awhile before washing up and going to bed. The next thing she knew, Jim Seaton was banging on the wagon box with a chunk of firewood.

"Up, Laurie—breakfast!" he called.

She couldn't believe it. She was dirty, worn to the bone, and completely dishevveled. On the other bunk, the throat of her white nightgown showing over the edge of the neatly turned down blanket, Celia was snoring in ladylike fashion. One peek outside told Laurie that Jim was not rawhiding her. A gray streak in the eastern sky promised dawn.

Though the days were torrid, the mornings up here on the high plains were bitterly cold. Cowboys had crowded around the ever-hot coffee pots. Laurie soon had bacon sizzling and biscuits cooking. There was stewed fruit, flapjacks, more coffee with lots of sugar, and as much beafsteak as the men could eat. They downed it quickly, not even looking at Laurie in the cool morning. Before the sun hit the edge of the valley, they were in their saddles taking the kinks out of frisky horses.

Jim Seaton seemed to know exactly what he wanted each man to do. They rode out in a fan, keeping straight ahead for three or four hours. Then, they would turn and come back to the shallow valley, driving everything they could raise before them. Laurie soon found herself alone with Jim Seaton. Jim had come back to hunker by the fire and drink another cup of coffee after the men had left.

"You're doing good, Laurie," he complimented her.

She didn't know whether to break down and cry—or to swear at him. Instead, she just glared at him for a moment.

"You don't need to knock yourself out helping me," she said. He seemed so hurt, that she added, "But thanks for what you've done."

"Think nothing of it," he said.

Her pulses stirred strangely. She looked at him over the tin mug of coffee she was working on. Rugged as a rock, that was Jim Seaton, the hombre she did not want—loyal as a hound dog. She had not known before that he was that sort. She had thought of him only as being another of Lou Falcon's hard-case hombres, someone to be climbed over on the way to the boss.

Jim tossed his cup into the wreck pan. The other men had to wash their own kits. Jim, as ramrod, had his washed for him. He stood up, tall against the brightening sky. Chuck Savin brought him his morning horse. Chuck's job was over until sunset; he settled down where Jim had been, a faint smirk on his thin lips.

"Workin' you kind of hard, ain't he?" Chuck said slyly.

"I can take it," Laurie snapped at him.

Chuck spat into the fire. "When you need me," he told her casually, "I'll be around. There's plenty of guys hate that hombre's guts."

Laurie had never worked so hard in her life. From pre-dawn to well after dark she bent over the hot fires. The Pothook wagon pulled in the second day with a grizzled old cook and a bunch of cowboys who were very much surprised by the appearance of the Flying F's hash slinger. They all knew Laurie, or had heard of her, but had never expected to see her here on the range.

Laurie had no time for primping. She kept her heavy hair in tight braids wound on top of her head to keep it out of the flames. There was more likely to be soot on her face than not. Each night she took a bath out of a dishpan in the Harem and scrubbed her levis and socks and shirt, so she could start out fresh the next day. But, as the men came down from the hills and the round-up progressed, Laurie steadily lost her battle for feminine daintiness.

CELIA JACKSON, on the other hand, was on a picnic. She got up when she felt like it, spent plenty of time making herself lovely, then took it easy while Laurie fetched breakfast for her. After the first two or three attempts to help, she had given up completely and just lolled around or, when Lou Falcon was available, she had ridden off with the tall man to look over some part of his domain or to lope down into the canyon for a swim in the cool pools of Deep Creek.

Nights, she would often sit on the tailgate of the Harem singing to the boys while plunking on a guitar. If ever there was a dream of a sweetheart and home, Celia filled the program, and Laurie's awareness of this grew steadily. One evening, when she put on the final pot of coffee for the nighthawks and the guards, she reflected bitterly on how Celia, in a full-skirted dress with a very slight bodice that did more than hint at her luscious figure, was the center of the admiring cowboys. Laurie was alone, except for the men who had been assigned to help her.

As she straightened up from the fire, she found that the tail of her shirt had slipped out and was fluttering in the breeze. She backed away from the fire and drifted into the darkness behind the chuck wagon near where a tarp had been set up as an auxiliary shelter. Unbuttoning her levis, she tucked the shirt under her belt, buttoned up, and buckled the belt again. She left the throat open so that the cool night breeze could reach her. Then, not ready for bed yet, she sat down on the grass with her back to a wagon wheel.

Of all the silly ways to catch a man, Laurie thought, she had picked out the worst. After this ordeal, Lou Falcon would never look at her. He would remember her in the ashes, Cinderella without her prince, too dogged at night to be entertaining. In contrast, he would forever remember Celia singing to the boys, dainty and lovely, laughing, maybe frolicking when he took her down the canyon for a swim.

Tears stung her eyes. Then she blinked quickly. A couple of cowboys had drifted up in the night. One led a weary horse; the other was on foot.

"All set, Chuck?" the man with the horse asked.

Laurie recognized the voice. It was Red O'Toole, a drifter who had once worked for the Burns' outfit. She had seen him around during the last week, repping for a half dozen of the smaller outfits in the Strip.

Chuck answered, "I don't think she'll play along."

"Why the hell not? Red asked. "She thinks they framed her brother, don't she? They're killing her with work, ain't they?"

"Sure," Chuck said, his voice uncertain. "Just a hunch I got. She's been trying to capture Lou Falcon, but I got a feeling she's fallen in love with Jim Seaton."

Laurie had never heard of anything so absurd. She hated both of the men. She only wanted Lou for what she could get out of him, and for what she could do to him—and now it looked as though she only had a tough job, and could do nothing to wreck the man. She sat up sharply against the wheel.

"Don't be silly," she snapped.

The two men were taken completely by surprise. Laurie could see their eyes white in the night. The horse had stepped back and was straining at the reins. Laurie stood up and walked over to them. Red O'Toole's face was a blank. Chuck Savin was wearing that old, secret, expression again.

"We been lookin' for you," he told Laurie. She knew he was lying. "Red, here, was thinkin' you was workin' too hard. He was wonderin' if you'd quit this job and go to work down the line for his outfit. He's got only half a dozen boys. It would be a pushover."

"You made up that proposition fast," Laurie accused.

Red's expression did not change. He asked, "You ain't fallen for that Jim Seaton like everybody says, have you?"

"Listen," Laurie said angrily, "I hate his guts. I hate Lou Falcon's guts. I hate Celia Johnson's guts, such as they are. They ruined me and my brother. They railroaded Hal into jail for ten years. You think I'd fall for any one of them?"

Red began to grin. Chuck's secret expresssion began to open up a little.

"I figgered you wouldn't change, Laurie."

What do you want me to do?" Laurie cut in.

"Well—" The men glanced at one another. "Nothin', Laurie. Just stand by. Don't be too rough on Jim. You don't got to be nice to him, either, but quit bein' mean. We figger on getting back at the Flying F and the Pothook for robbing us blind and framing your brother. When we're ready, we want you to keep Jim out of our way."

Laurie could tell them to go to the devil, but if she did, she would never learn what they were up to. She decided to play along—for the time being.

"I'm with you, boys," she said. But she didn't shake hands on it.

Laurie drifted past the smouldering fire. Dust lay thick in the air. The aroma of boiled coffee mixed with woodsmoke. Celia had hoisted herself up onto the tail gate of the Harem to start her nightly concert. She let the hem of her dress fall back to disclose one gleaming, dimpled knee. The shoulder of her bodice had slipped down, too, as if by accident. But Laurie knew better. Celia believed in advertising, and she was sure that hers was a figure that the men would appreciate. The men were sure, too.

CELIA SWUNG into La Paloma, and Laurie drifted on around the bunched men. It was a big crowd, too, since all the camps were practically deserted when Celia put on her unusual round-up entertainment.

Laurie found Jim Seaton and Lou Falcon off by themselves having a rather heated discussion. Pretending not to notice them, she stood near enough so that they would not miss her. Though she could not hear what they were saying, the conversation shut off abruptly and she knew that they had seen her. She continued ignoring them while watching Celia singing up there on the tailgate.

Ever since overhearing the short conversation between Chuck and Red, Laurie had been puzzled by one remark that Red had made. "She *thinks* they framed her brother, don't she?" It was that one word, *thinks,* that had set her off. She had known damn well that her brother had been framed by the Flying F. So did everyone else. Red, who ought to know what had happened, had said she *thinks* Hal had been framed. Had she been wrong, after all?

She gathered her thoughts together,

turned around, and almost stepped on the two men who had been talking behind her. Lou's dark face was calculating. Jim Seaton seemed worried. Laurie slanted at them, impartially, her most devastating smile. This gave Jim more concern, but it only made Lou Falcon angry.

"Well—Laurie—" he said angrily, "are you ready to admit that the cook's job is too big for you?"

"Of course not!" She hadn't expected anything like that. "Has there been anything wrong with my work?"

"That's not it!" Lou said harshly. "You had no business taking on the job in the first place. It's a man's job."

Laurie had become angry, too. "I've got my meals on time, and nobody's complained about my cooking. I can do the job. I'm a better cook than anybody who's ever worked for you before. Besides, I told you I need the job." She turned to Jim. "What are your complaints?"

Jim shook his shaggy head. "You're just a little bit too good at it," he said. "The boys never ate such vittles. They're talking."

She laughed, but it was short and without humor. She knew that the men liked her cooking, but it did not matter to her now. This whole affair had been a mistake. All Laurie could do was bull it out. They were approaching the end of the round-up, and if she had not accomplished what she had come out here to do, she could retire gracefully. At any rate, she would not quit. She would stick it out.

"Then, if there are no complaints," she said, "I'll hit the sack."

For the last couple of nights, she had slept under the chuck wagon. Celia's admirers and late hours had begun to bother her. Tired as she was, she scrubbed a fresh outfit for the next day. Then, in the cover of night and behind a tarpaulin, she took a quick sponge bath, slipped into the old

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shirt that she had turned into a nightgown, and slipped into her bed, a hammock that she had slung from the running gear of the chuck wagon. She had not been in it more than a minute or two when Jim Seaton crawled under the wagon and gently shook the hammock.

"I had to come, Laurie," he said in a whisper.

"All right. You're here," she said. "You had to come. Now, you have to go."

"I can't," he said.

She shoved back the blanket and threw her legs over the side of the hammock. His face was only a blurr in the night, yet she had a sudden, almost irresistible, desire to throw her arms around his neck and hug him to her. It was queer and strange, and it had never happened like this before. She reckoned she could mark it off to the effects of too much hard work and too little sleep, since he was surely the last guy in the world she wanted to hug.

"What's keeping you?" she asked.

"You," he said. "You've been working harder than anybody else at the round-up. You're not working for the money, even if you say you are. You wouldn't work that hard if you were. You're working off a grudge."

"Run along," she said.

"He'll never marry you," Jim said.

Ice trickled down her backbone. She leaned toward him with the hammock swinging back behind her, and her bare feet digging into the grass. Somehow he had guessed everything; or were her intentions so obvious he hadn't had to guess? She wouldn't admit it, but she suspected that Jim was right. No matter what Laurie had that Celia didn't have, Celia still owned the huge Pothook spread and Laurie was only a homeless ex-squatter cooking for a round-up crew.

Jim grinned at her through the gloom. He took her hands in his for a moment, then hauled her out of the hammock. Because there was no room to maneuver under the wagon, she tumbled on top of him. He swung her around so that she landed sitting across his legs. Stunned by the suddenness of it, Laurie did not try to break away from him. The hard muscles of his left arm closed around her slender back. His right hand reached for her waist. When she looked up at him, he kissed her full on her soft mouth. There was nothing she could do to keep her lips from responding to his kiss.

A soft sigh escaped Laurie, her breath caught, and her pulse went mad. She could feel his heart running away, too, beating against his ribs like some giant locomotive with the throttle stuck at wide open. Her arms, without her willing it, crept around his neck, holding him closer.

At first she thought that it was the kiss that had sent the shooting stars across her eyes. Then she looked up and realized that a bull's-eye lantern was glaring at her, and that Celia was laughing.

"Come on, boys!" Celia called gaily. "If you want a real lesson in loving, here it is. No charge. Entrance free!"

Harshly, Lou Falcon's voice rasped out.

"Move over, Celia," he shouted. "Come out of there, Jim. I'll kill you for this."

Jim and Laurie broke apart. Jim's face was grim. The mouth that had been so soft a moment before was hard, and the eyes were full of violence. As he crawled out from under the wagon, Lou did not let him get up. Lou kicked Jim on the side of his head with his flat-heeled boot. Jim settled down on hands and knees like a pole-axed steer about to collapse. Over him, Lou raged.

"I told you to leave her alone," he shouted. "She's mine."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Tension Mounts

CROUCHING under the wagon, Laurie did not see much of the fight. The dancing beams from half a dozen lanterns

were all the light cast upon it, and half the time Laurie had to look between men's legs as the battle shifted back and forth. Furthermore, she had thought it was over at the start when Lou kicked Jim in the head. But Jim was built of tougher material than either Lou or Laurie had expected. While his boss cursed at him, the foreman of the Flying F gritted his teeth against the pain in his head and finally came off his hands and knees ready for war.

Butting Lou in the stomach, Jim threw his arms around Lou's knees and pinwheeled his boss to the ground. For awhile, they rolled and struggled in the dust, and then they broke away, got to their feet and sparred for several minutes while looking for an advantage. Laurie, wanting to get in on this war instead of watching it through the shifting crowd, backed under the wagon and fumbled with her levis. Somewhat better clothed than she had been at the beginning, she crawled out from her shelter and shoved her way through the bunched men, just in time to see Jim Seaton throw his boss over his shoulder into the cook fire.

The breeze brought a stench of burning clothes and singed hair, but Lou did not stay in the hot coals for long. He rolled right out of the fire, spreading blazing embers and flames all over the place, as he squirmed in the grass to extinguish his burning shirt. Then he grabbed the coffee pot and flung it at Jim Seaton. Fortunately for Jim, the boss's aim wasn't too good. The pot hurtled past him to spread consternation in the scalded ranks of cowboys behind him. Jim dove across the fire. He got Lou in a flying tackle that took his boss right off the ground and shot both of them out of the circle of lantern-light for a moment. They landed within inches of Laurie's bare feet where, except for herself and one other person, there were no witnesses to what happened next.

Jim Seaton had gotten a hammer lock on Lou's neck, and was about to win the fight, when someone stepped out of the darkness and knocked Jim cold with a length of firewood. Jim collapsed before the men toting lanterns could rush up to light the scene. Lou Falcon, who did not know yet how he had won the fight, stood back to stare down on his fallen enemy. Biting her lower lip as a help to keep quiet, Laurie merged with the crowd. This was one time that she did not want to blurt out what was in her mind. She had recognized the person who had whanged Jim over the head, and until she knew the reason for the act, she thought she had better keep the secret to herself.

Besides, Jim was getting plenty of attention. He had hardly hit the ground before Celia dropped to her knees beside him and pillowed his head on her nice, soft lap. Celia cooed to him as if he was a baby. She sprinkled his face with tears and gave him a big, luscious kiss.

But Lou Falcon, not willing to leave well-enough alone, dragged Celia away from Jim, and gave her a shove toward the Harem. Celia balked. Lou slapped her so sharply that tears sprang into her eyes again as she went off unhappily. Then Lou hoisted Jim to his feet. Jim was too groggy to stand alone.

"You're fired!" Lou rasped. "You hear me, Jim? I don't want you around any more. Get out and stay out!"

Jims eyes were hard, but his legs were weak. He said something that sounded very much like "skunk," and swung a fist at Lou's chin. Missing by a foot, the momentum spun him around and dropped him to the ground again. Laughing at him, Lou reached down to hoist Jim back up again.

It was as much as Laura could stand. Without thinking of the consenquences, or caring about them, she plunged into the fray. Her shoulder caught Lou in the short ribs and drove him away from Jim. With her bare feet planted securely on the ground, Laurie faced up to the furious Lou.

"You leave him alone!" she shouted. "And keep your dirty hands off me, too!"

Lou Falcon's dark eyes were stunned. Laurie had lost her last chance to get to him—and to ruin him.

WHILE LAURIE was packing her gear and rolling her blankets in their tarp, Chuck Savin brought in her stallion, Rajah. Chuck was glad to be rid of that horse since it had been causing no end of trouble. The big beast pawed and praced and snorted. Chuck helped Laurie with her saddle and hoisted the heavy bags up behind the cantle.

"Too bad we couldn't of got together sooner," he said wistfully.

"Seems to me like you tried to get together with me once before," she mocked. "Remember?"

He remembered. "Never was stamped so hard on my foot in my life," he grinned. "Still hurts on a damp day. Reckon I had it coming to me, Laurie. But you can't blame a feller for trying to get his hands on you. You'd of had the whole camp drooling after you if Lou hadn't given strict orders to concentrate on Celia."

Laurie only laughed. There was no competition between the lovely, carefree Celia and Laurie of the pans and pots.

"I'm the cook," she said. "Celia's the romance. Lay off the blarny, Chuck."

There had been no blarny in what Chuck had told her, but he knew that she would never be for him.

"Ready to go?" he asked, as Laurie stamped into her boots. If Jim was ready, so was she. She saw him riding up, and lithely she stepped into the saddle. Chuck said quietly, "Didn't figger on Jim and Lou breaking up. We couldn't ask for anything better. Keep Jim mad so he don't come back to the Flying F, Laurie, and you'll never be sorry."

Chuck couldn't tell her anything more. He nodded to Jim and faded back into the darkness. Laurie hadn't seen Red O'Toole around this evening, so she had no idea what he and Chuck were cooking up. As Jim got closer, she saw how pale he was. He was slumped in the saddle, hardly the gallant impression he usually made.

"You don't have to do this for me," he said to Laurie.

"I'm doing it for myself," she told him. "Nobody's got a right to claim me as his woman, and that means Lou, too. I'm just riding along with you, Jim, because I'm headed in the same direction."

"You sure as hell are a generous filly," Jim said with a small smile.

Side by side, they rode through the camp past a sea of turning faces. Celia sat demurely on the tail gate of the Harem, her eyes downcast. Lou Falcon stood near by, glaring. Laurie had never seen such concentrated hatred. It frightened her, but it gave her a measure of satisfaction, too, Then, they were beyond the lights and headed down-canyon.

"It's tough on you," Laurie said after awhile. "I feel it's my fault. You had a real good job at the Flying F."

"You did me a favor," Jim said wryly. "I've got some money in the bank. A man can't work all his life for somebody else. It's about time I got started on my own."

A glowing sensation warmed her and she rode a little closer to him.

"Things turn out kind of peculiar at times," she said softly. "You make your plans, and they go whoosh." Then, the problem that had been bothering her became uppermost in her mind. "Do you know who hit you over the head with that chunk of wood?" she asked. He didn't. She flung the answer at him. "It was Celia!"

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Celia! She wouldn't—" He had pulled in his horse. His forehead became furrowed with thought. "But why would Celia do that?"

"I don't know," Laurie said. "Maybe she didn't want Lou to be hurt. Maybe she was sore because you and Lou were fighting over me. Girls do funny things sometimes. But I don't think either of those was the reason."

"Then—why?"

"It's all mixed up in my head," Laurie said. "Chuck Savin's cooking up something with Red O'Toole and those other men from the Strip. I don't know what. I heard Red O'Toole talking. He knows something about my brother that I don't know. I think he knows who framed Hal and how."

She remembered how Hal had been caught with some Flying F steers with poorly-blotted brands. Her brother claimed that he had found them on his range and was drifting them back to the Flying F before anybody got the idea that he had been altering their iron. No one believed him. Jim hadn't believed Hal either, when Hal claimed that he was looking for Jim to turn over those steers.

"You don't think Red and Chuck are working for Celia?" Jim asked, incredulous.

"I didn't," Laurie said, "but I do now. Only, I don't know why."

"We'll find out," Jim said.

The weariness and the effects of the beating evaporated from him. He was suddenly strong and tall in the saddle again. He smiled softly at Laurie.

"When this is all over," he said, "I want to marry you. It'll be tough on you, though, with me just starting out."

"You can't make it too tough for me, Jim," Laurie said. "Come here, Jim."

He came to her, and her arms were warm and her lips were soft. He was man enough for her, Laurie knew.

"Let's hurry, Jim," she begged. "I can't wait much longer. Let's get to work."

He gave her one final, reassuring kiss and an embrace that promised many more. Then they wheeled their horses and rode toward the north.

JIM CAUGHT Chuck Savin with the remuda. Insisting that he knew nothing, Chuck swore bitterly at Laurie. Jim told Chuck he'd let him ride on out of here if he would tell what was up. Chuck was still ignorant. Jim shrugged it off.

"Okay, Chuck," he said. "We'll just take you in to town to talk to the sheriff. He might want to look over some of his old wanted posters."

"Te hell with you!" Chuck cursed. "He's got nothin' on me. Go ahead and take me to town."

Jim tied Chuck's hands behind his back with a piece of rawhide. Then, he dropped a noose over Chuck's head and stepped into the saddle to head for town. They hadn't gone a hundred yards before Chuck was screaming. Jim reined in his mount. Chuck was bawling like a calf and it made Laurie sick to her stomach.

"Lemme go, Jim," Chuck begged. "I might of tripped and got a broken neck. Swear you'll make him let me go, Laurie, with a couple of extra horses."

"We'll let you go," she promised, "and we don't care how many Flying F horses you take with you."

Jim untied the terrified nighthawk. Chuck hunkered on the ground.

You won't believe me," he said, "but I'll tell you the truth. Celia was sore at Hal! She took a shine to him at that barbecue last spring. She was meeting him nights."

This was news to Laurie, but as she looked back she could remember many times when her brother had ridden out on mysterious missions. "Then, Hal took up with that Mexican gal down at Palon Pinto," Chuck went on. Laurie knew about her, a lovely, dark-eyed girl she had thought might become her sister-in-law before Hal's jail term had broken up the romance. Mariquita had been disconsolate.

"So Celia's hired me and Red to frame Hal," Chuck said. "It was too good for Red. He's been blackmailing Celia. He's got a big bunch of unbranded stuff from the Pothook and Flying F. It's in Dutchman's Canyon. Lou's been looking for it, but Celia's been keeping him away from there."

Jim and Laurie were silent, each turning over his story and looking for flaws.

"I believe him, Jim," Laurie said. "You

better get going, Chuck, and you better travel fast in case we don't catch Red."

But it wasn't as easy as that. You can't abduct a man in the middle of a round-up camp, with a hundred punchers around, and not expect to arouse somebody. Two riders had come up quickly in the night. Chuck could not run; he had to stand his ground. Neither could Laurie and Jim get away now. They waited until Lou Falcon hove up with one of his men.

Lou's rage was tremendous. "What's going on around here?" he demanded. "You were fired, Jim. You quit, Laurie. Get out of here and stay out."

"Tell him what you told us, Chuck," Jim said softly.

Chuck started off slowly, then he spilled it all. Lou had gotten down from his horse. He listened Chuck out, then he snapped at his companion.

"He's lying, Slim. We'll take him in and sweat the truth out of him."

Laurie said softly: "We promised to let him go."

"We're taking him in!" Lou roared.

"No!" Jim said, and that was all.

When Lou turned his angry face on him, Jim swung a fist from the roots of the grass. Lou's teeth clattered together like a full wreck pan of dishes. He passed out cold.

"Run along, Chuck," Laurie said.

Slim was swinging from the saddle. Jim stopped him.

"Ride on back to camp, Slim," Jim said, "and tell the people Lou's gone for a little ride in the moonlight."

For the last three years Slim had been accustomed to taking Jim's orders. Tonight, he did as he was told.

LOU CURSED Jim and Laurie steadily as they rode for Dutchman's Canyon. This was not only a fruitless trip, he claimed, but Jim would suffer plenty for it when it was over. But Lou's threats carried no weight because he was helpless in the saddle, with his feet tied together under the belly of his horse. Dawn was breaking over the rimrock when they came across a fence closing in a narrow part of the remote canyon.

"Who's there?" came a crisp challenge.

Jim glanced at Lou. Lou nodded.

"Maybe you're right," he said quietly. "You ready to let me loose?"

Jim cut the thongs. Lou rubbed his wrists for a moment. He made a couple of practice draws with his .45's. The guard, wherever he was hiding out, challenged again. Lou's dark eyes had lost their heat. They were hard as agate now.

"Maybe I've been a sucker," he said. Turning to Laurie, he added, "If Chuck told the truth and Hal is not guilty, I'm sorry as hell. But I don't want Celia dragged into this."

Laurie shrugged. "She'll be dragged in—and plenty—" she threatened, "if my brother isn't cleared completely."

"Damn it!" the guard bellowed. "Quit gabbling, and come up here where I can see you."

"Keep your pants on," Jim shouted back. To Lou, he added, "Hal and Laurie will expect to get their ranch back, all their stock, too, and maybe a little extra."

"They'll get it all back," Lou promised. "Now, I reckon I'll go up and palaver with that gent in the canyon."

He wheeled his horse away to trot down the canyon a couple of dozen yards, then turned back and rolled the spurs. The horse cleared the brush fence in one graceful leap. A gun blasted up-canyon, followed closely by a couple of more irons. Lou let go with a wild yell. Right on his heels was Jim Seaton. Laurie, who had been told to keep out of the battle, couldn't have stayed behind if she had wanted to. Her stallion, Rajah, insisted on being in the thick of it, and so did she.

Lou was hit in the first volley, but kept his saddle. Jim shouted for his men to follow—just as if he actually had a crew with him. Laurie howled her own version of a

Comanche war-cry, and, when Rajah landed beyond the fence, she pulled her carbine from the boot. Spotting a man up on the canyon wall, she sprayed him with rock-dust and drove him to shelter. Then she saw Red and Jim, not ten yards apart, shooting at each other point blank. Lou, hit again, was thrown from the saddle. Laurie dropped beside him.

She ripped off the tail of her shirt. There was a flesh wound high up on Lou's left arm. She tied that up first. A couple of his ribs had been smashed. She ripped up more of her shirt, and he bit down on his lower lip as she worked on his side. Since he wasn't spitting blood, his lungs hadn't been hit, nor had he taken a slug in his heart. It would be a long while, however, before Lou could ride comfortably again.

Laurie glanced up when she had finished. Vaguely, she realized that she had acquired an audience. It was Jim holding up Red O'Toole. Red's arm was broken where Jim had been forced to shoot him to disarm him.

"Got another patient for you," Jim said. "The rest of the boys have left for a healthier neighborhood. This canyon's as thick with rustled cattle as a dog is with fleas."

Laurie's shirt could offer no more bandage material without seriously disrupting her attire. She remembered a dress in her saddle bag, and with it she bound and splinted Red's arm. He quit cursing her when she had finished.

"Thanks, Laurie," he said. "Reckon I was growing too big for my pants."

"We all do at times," she told him. She stood up, but she was light-headed and giddy and she knew that her knees were buckling. But she did not know what it meant, since Laurie was a girl who had never fainted in her life. This time, though, she proved that she needed no practice. She managed to perform perfectly. So did Jim, and Laurie landed right in his arms. Lifting her up, he carried her down to the stream that cut through the canyon's bed. She came back to consciousness with Jim bathing her face in cool water.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried. "Everything's going to be all right?"

"Everything's perfect," Jim said.

He bent down to kiss her. As his lips touched her wet face, she clung to him thinking that the word "perfect" was a mighty mild description of how it was going to be with her and Jim. ♥ ♥ ♥

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LOVE NOVELS MAGAZINE 25c

LASSO THE MOON FOR LOVE!

By
Val Gendron

Philip whispered, "It's not seemly to talk to one of them."

Phil was steady, safe and dependable. . . . And the reckless red-head was strictly a here-today-gone-tomorrow gent. What girl, Nancy asked herself, would ever want a safety-first sweetheart?

WHEN Philip MacKenzie said he would call for Nancy McGrail at eleven fifteen, he meant exactly that. He did not mean eleven twelve, or eleven twenty, or any other possible combination of the hour and minute hands. This scrupulous dedication to the twenty-four hours in the day was very difficult for

Nancy, who habitually was about a half hour late for everything.

"I suppose," Philip said, swinging his cane impatiently, "you'll keep me waiting at the altar, too."

"Very likely," Nancy tossed her head. "It's customary for the groom to wait for the bride on that occasion."

"Bah!" Philip said. "It's a matter of principle with me to be on time."

He was really getting angry, and his was a temper that he controlled with difficulty. The color was mounting in his face. Nancy said lightly, "It's equally a matter of principle with me, Philip, to keep young men waiting; and if you aren't willing, there are plenty more who will."

Philip controlled himself with visible effort and cast a reproachful glance at her. "You're just trying to annoy me with such talk. I do wish you'd be sensible," he sighed. "As my wife-to-be, it would be nice if you conducted yourself with more dignity."

"Poof!" Nancy said and laughed. "In the first place, Philip, it's in no way certain that I'll be your wife; and in the second place, I'm too young to be dignified. I don't intend to settle down until I'm at least twenty-four, and in the meantime I intend to enjoy myself. There's a rumor to the effect that one is only young once." She looked at him slyly from under long lashes. "Were you ever young, Philip?"

He looked at her soberly. If Philip MacKenzie had a sense of humor, no one had been able to discover a trace of it. "I'm twenty-four now," he said frowning. "That can hardly be considered old. Five years," he went on seriously, "is about the correct difference in age between a husband and a wife. That was the difference between my father and my mother's ages, and they were very happy."

Nancy laughed. "Philip you're priceless. Come on, hurry, or we'll be late."

"We wouldn't be late," he replied logically, "if you'd been ready on time. And I don't like to hurry. You know that, Nancy."

"Just this once," she pleaded.

Deliberately, he settled his hat firmly on his head. "I fear I indulge you too much." Without further discussion, he broke into a run. His long legs pounded so fast that Nancy had to struggle to keep up with him. Despite all his sober talk, he was as anxious as she was to see the big, twenty-mule teams come in from the borax mine. They came every second Wednesday, and the entire town turned out to welcome them.

They could hear the retorts of the great bull whips that rang out like rifle shots, and the excited shouts of the people, "They've come!"

Philip tipped his hat, said, "Pardon me," and elbowed a place for Nancy in the front row. It didn't matter for Philip, he stood head and shoulders higher than anyone else. Then the dust rose in a great cloud, there was a thunder of hoofs, and the cracking of whips as the muleskinners with their teams and heavy wagons turned the corner and galloped headlong down the main street toward the railroad station.

The muleskinners were a colorful and a profane lot, big, brawny, and reckless. No really nice girl would be caught dead talking to one—not if her mother saw her. One team after another flashed by, and the drivers swelled their chests and showed off their superb skill before the crowd.

Then there was a wild cry, "Avast to starboard!" Right smack in front of Nancy, one of the great wagons came to a halt with the mules rearing and plunging and shrilling, while those behind piled up with loud protest and brutal cursing. Standing up, instead of sitting, in the driver's seat was a great, red-haired giant of a man.

HE WAS staring down at Nancy and his eyes were filled with laughter and daring. "Ship ahoy!" he shouted. "You with the pink pennants flying, as trim a craft as this roving seaman has cast his eye on. Come aboard, lass!"

Nancy glanced at the pink streamers to her bonnet. The big red-head was talking to her! She flushed.

"Shiver my timbers for a lubber!" he cried and threw back his great head and roared with laughter. "It's a Killarney Rose!"

"McGrail's the name," Nancy retorted, "and I'm a Scotswoman."

"So? And is Glasgow your home port?"

Philip pushed forward, and he bent close to Nancy. "Come, my dear," he whispered. "It's not seemly to talk to one of them."

The muleskinner watched him with amusement in his eyes. He wore a flaming red shirt, open at the front to show the blue and red tattoo of a clipper ship under full sail across his chest. The muscles of his arms and back threatened to split the seams at any moment. With a flick of his wrist, he caused the bull whip to snake out and knock Philip's hat into the dust.

"Belay that!" It was a voice that would have carried through a howling typhoon on the China Sea. Philip bent to pick up his hat, and the big muleskinner looked directly into Nancy's eyes. "Come aboard, lass," he urged.

Nancy was sorely tempted to take him up on his offer. She'd always wanted to ride one of the big wagons, with its twenty mules pulling at the traces. Then Philip laid a restraining hand on her arm.

The giant laughed. "As you like, lass. But make no mistake, this is no ships that pass in the night. I've let go my anchor, you'll be seeing me around town; and to see Bryan O'Keefe is to love him." He cracked the whip, the mules strained and pulled, and the big wagon slowly got under way.

Nancy stared after him. What was there about that red-headed giant that made her heart turn over? She watched Philip brushing the dust from his hat, his face flushed with anger.

"Why didn't you hit him?" she asked impulsively.

"I'm a banker," he said and his lips were tight. "I don't engage in street brawls."

She looked at him steadily. For all his six feet, he didn't seem much of a man in her eyes. She knew he could box, and it seemed almost cowardice to let that Bryan O'Keefe knock off his hat without protest.

"You going to let him get away with it?" she persisted.

"There is more than one way of dealing with such a situation. Come on, Nancy." He took her arm. "We've had enough of this."

Nancy followed with a rebellious heart. She didn't want to walk meekly along beside Philip, and her heart was fluttering strangely. No man had ever held up traffic before on her account.

"He was handsome," she said half in thought and half to provoke Philip.

"Did you think so?" he asked coldly.

Mischief flickered in her fathomless, gray eyes. "Every woman has a sort of weakness for a rogue. And Bryan O'Keefe was a rouge, if ever I saw one."

"Would you like me better," he said reproachfully, "if I gave up my job at the bank to drive a mule team, and wore my shirt open?" he asked.

Nancy gulped. He couldn't be serious. She stole a look up at him, but he was striding along, his face set. "I'd like you a good bit better," she said breathlessly, "if you weren't so stiffly proper every minute of the time. A girl likes to have some fun, especially when she's being courted. She likes to be taken buggy riding and to a dance once in a while."

"There's a dance tonight at the Rocky Mountain Club, would you like to go?"

He still didn't look at her, just walked along grimly, nodding from time to time and raising his tall hat to acquaintances.

"Would you really take me?" she asked, and a smile broke through her pretty pout.

"I would, if you insist."

"It's not a very gracious invitation, Philip," she said and the pout came back.

"But I suppose it's the best I can expect from you."

"Shall I wear a red shirt?" he asked sarcastically.

"Oh, now you're being plain nasty!" Nancy exclaimed. "And here I thought you were trying to be nice."

"And who wouldn't be nasty," he came back, losing control of his temper. "The way you were looking at that red-headed sailor. Haven't you heard about sailors? They have a wife in every port."

"I believe you're jealous," Nancy said quite calmly. It was very comforting to see that the perfect Mr. Philip MacKenzie had at least one human weakness.

He must have read what was in her mind, for he blurted, "I've a weakness all right, and it's being in love with a flibbertygibbet of a light-headed, young woman who has nothing better to do with her eyes than cast calf-glances at the first roughneck that accosts her. I'll pick you up tonight at eight o'clock. I wish you good day, Miss McGrail."

WITH THAT, he strode off down the street and left her standing open-mouthed. *The like of him!* she thought. ***He's got red blood in his veins after all, and good hot-tempered Scotch blood at that. And, all the time I've been thinking there was nothing in them but ink, and nothing in his heart but ledgers and columns of figures.***

However, the next instant, such affection dried up and turned to dust. What did he think he was doing, walking off and leaving her alone like that? *Love, indeed!* Nancy resolved to show Mr. Philip MacKenzie, of the punctual ways, the meaning and definition, the breath and scope of love.

Nancy made a little circle with her parasol in the front of the street, and put a dot precisely in the middle of it. If she looked, she could still see Philip's tall form retreating down the street. But, she didn't look. Her lips curved in a secret smile. Here she was with two men to chose from, and it was the very nicest thing that had happened to her in all her seventeen years.

For she had no doubt whatever that Bryan O'Keefe meant just what he said. She'd be seeing him again. She wasn't quite so sure that to see the O'Keefe was to love him, but she was willing to find out. It would be, she decided, a very good thing for Philip. Competition, someone had once said, was the spice of life. Philip MacKenzie was about to have some spice added to his life.

She strolled homeward slowly. It could well be that Bryan O'Keefe wasn't exactly the sort of man to sit down in her mother's prim parlor. But then you never could tell. He probably had kissed the Blarney Stone, and she wouldn't put it past the red-headed giant to charm her mother into complete submission. It was Mrs. McGrail who considered Philip MacKenzie quite a proper, young man and a good catch. So did most of the mothers in High Pass with marriageable daughters. If Nancy turned Philip down, he wouldn't go begging long.

He called for her promptly at eight clock. Not one minute before, and not one minute after. For once Nancy was ready. She was so excited at going to the dance at the Rocky Mountain Club that she had been ready since seven-thirty. But, at the sight of Philip coming briskly up the walk, she fled into her bedroom. "Tell him I'll be right out," she called to her mother.

There was nothing to do in the bedroom but examine again her reflection in the mirror. It was highly satisfactory. Her hair was curling softly about her face, her cheeks were becomingly pink with excitement, and her gray eyes danced. She was wearing a dark green, silk dress that followed the graceful lines of her slim figure faithfully, before it fell richly in a full skirt. When she whirled, as she would at the dance later, a trim ankle was daringly exposed in a flesh-colored stocking with a beautifully embroidered black clock. The

stockings were the gift of a wealthy aunt in San Francisco, and had been imported from Paris. Nancy bit her lips to make them redder, shook her head, and the long earrings danced coquettishly at the neck.

"Nancy!" her mother called. "Philip's here."

"I know," Nancy said softly to her reflection, "I saw him coming up the walk." And louder, "In a minute, dear." Then she sat down in a chair and counted to fifty before she went to meet him.

He rose when she entered the room, and his eyes swept over her, missing no detail of her dress, but his face was expressionless. "I said, eight o'clock, Nancy," he announced in pained tones.

"Think how waiting strengthens your character," she tossed out carelessly.

Mrs. McGrail said, "Nancy, how can you be so sharp?"

"Well," Nancy pouted, "I've been waiting a good hour for him. He can cool his heels a while and see how it feels."

"I said, eight o'clock," he reminded her with infuriating logic.

Nancy sighed. "If just once in your life you'd be something less than perfect, Philip, I'd welcome the variety."

He didn't deign to answer. Instead, he took her firmly by the arm and shepherded her out of the house. "We are going to have a good time," he said slowly. "We are not going to bicker."

Nancy looked up at him. He was very handsome as he walked along beside her, his shoulders back, his head high. Looking at him, she could feel her heart soften. Men showed their love in different ways, but it didn't make it any the less love. But just once, she wished passionately that the fine facade of his would crack and show the emotion beneath.

He was smiling down at her now. "I made a lucky deal today," he said. "Two more like that and I'll be able to buy a house, and then we can get married."

The softness that had suffused Nancy's heart evaporated. "Just which is it you want, Philip, a house or a wife?"

"You can't have a wife without a house," he replied.

"Some men manage," she snapped back. "Some men get carried away by their love."

"I don't think much of that sort of love," he said simply.

They had reached the door of the Rocky Mountain Club and the music drifted down to them. It had no charms to soothe the indignation that burned within Nancy. "I do," she said firmly as she swept up her skirt and went swiftly up the steps. She was aware that her ankles showed beneath her skirt, and she could feel Philip's eyes upon them.

HE FOLLOWED her up the stairs, and she could hear his footsteps pounding behind her, though she did not turn her head. She started for the cloak room, but he grabbed her arm and swung her into the measure of the dance.

"You're enough to try the patience of a saint!" he declared.

"Then why do you put up with me?" she taunted.

"You know why," he said through tight lips as he swept her across the floor.

"Say it, Philip!" Her eyes as well as her lips were laughing up at him.

"You know well enough." His breath was coming rapidly, and she knew his temper was giving him trouble again.

"Say it!" she insisted.

"That I love you," he admitted grimly. "You know I do. Though why I do is beyond me. I know any number of girls who would be delighted to have me take them to this dance. They would be polite, and soft spoken, and make themselves agreeable to me."

"If you're so dissatisfied, you can always change partners," she retorted.

His arm around her waist tightened. "If I had a grain of sense, I would!"

"For a man who prides himself on his rationality, I should think you would."

"Someday, Nancy," he said tensely, "you'll press me too far."

Suddenly she twisted free of his embrace. "That applies to you, too, Philip MacKenzie. Is it your idea that the way to court a girl is to tell her how much nicer any other woman would be?"

He looked baffled and confused.

"You can hardly expect me to be flattered when you tell me that if you had a grain of sense, you wouldn't be out with me." With that, she swept across the dance floor to the cloak room and left him standing speechless and red-faced. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sam Higglesby walk over and talk with him. Sam owned the biggest livery stable in town, and Nancy knew, with a dull, sinking sensation around her heart, that Philip would let the chance of business keep him from following her.

She hung up her cape. Else Bennett, the plain daughter of the grain and feed man, smiled shyly. "I see you and Philip have had another fight."

Nancy was tempted to snap, "It's none of your business," but restrained herself. Instead she said, "Don't let appearances deceive you."

Else shrugged. "You can't blame a girl for hoping. I've heard one way to get a man is on the rebound, and I thought I'd just warn you, I'll be in stand-by position if you throw Philip over."

"You're welcome to him, if you can get him," Nancy said defiantly.

Margaret Williams looked up brightly. "Is it open season on MacKenzie?"

Nancy glanced in the mirror, checked her appearance, patted a wayward curl in place. "I've always believed," she said, and wondered why her heart suddenly felt so bleak, "that to the victor belongs the spoils."

Margaret Williams gathered her skirt about her, and started for the door. "All I needed was the word," she laughed. "MacKenzie is one man I'd like to cut my brand on. I'll take him for life, if I can get him."

Else looked at her shyly. "Did you really mean it, Nancy? Really? Honestly don't you love him?"

Nancy was still staring at her reflection, appalled at what she had done. Margaret Williams was a notorious flirt. It was rumored that she would stop at nothing to get her man, and here she had tossed Philip right into her arms, especially considering the way he was feeling.

"Did you mean it?" Else persisted.

Nancy pulled herself together quickly. "Of course, I meant it," she declared.

Else edged over to the mirror. "I wish I had your looks, Nancy, and your charm."

"If you combed your hair a little looser, it would help," Nancy said absently.

"Do you think so?" Else asked with pathetic eagerness.

Nancy nodded, impatient to be gone. She had obviously laid up a store of trouble for herself and she had better see what she could do to set it straight.

"Would you help me?" Else begged.

It was on the tip of Nancy's tongue to refuse, but she caught a glimpse of Else's face. She couldn't very well refuse. She had let herself in for this, and it behooved her to play her hand out and not toss in her cards.

There was nothing to do but smile at Else. "Sit down, it'll only take a minute."

TEARS of gratitude shone in Else's pale, blue eyes. "None of that," Nancy said sharply. She took out her comb and went to work with a will. Else's plain and colorless face presented something of a challenge, and Nancy found herself working with absorption. It was amazing how much it improved the pale girl to fluff out the curls at the side of her face. It made her seem less thin, and the pale, blue eyes had a hauntingly lovely quality.

"I hardly know myself!" Else gasped.

"You do look different," Nancy admitted. Else's fragile loveliness did have a

certain charm, and her docile, quiet character would be exactly what a man like Philip MacKenzie, with his regular habits, would like. It could be that Else would be more of a real threat than the predatory Margaret Williams. "Shall we join the dance?" Nancy suggested.

"Oh," Else said shyly. "You go first."

Nancy needed no urging. Of her own free will she had thrown Philip to the wolves, and if she was going to protect herself she had better get back on the dance floor. She hoped against hope that Sam Higglesby was holding him in the firm clutches of business.

It proved to be an ill-founded hope. As soon as she came out under the bright lights, she saw that Margaret Williams had indeed snared her prey and she was dancing languidly, cheek to cheek, in Philip's arms.

"Ahoy!"

There was the big, red-headed giant of a muleskinner, still in his bright red shirt, and at closer range, he seemed even bigger and more vital.

"I told you that to see the O'Keefe was to love him, and here you are waiting for me, possessing your soul with as much patience as you can muster.

"Really!" Nancy gasped.

"Belay that, girl," he said. "I've sailed the seven seas, and I've seen the prettiest things in the way of female attractions that any of the continents and islands can offer. But, I must say that I'm glad I let go my anchor in this town, where the prettiest of them is."

Bryan O'Keefe nodded at the orchestra. "I got all my sails set to catch that breeze, shall we voyage together?"

Nancy laughed. "Is that an invitation to dance?"

"Is it the English language you're not acquainted with?" he grinned. "Let me make myself perfectly clear. You're the trimmest craft this sailorman ever set his eyes on, and I've a mind to sign papers for a voyage whether it be round the Horn, to China, or across the North Atlantic to Liverpool."

"That's supposed to make everything perfectly clear?" Nancy said guessing more at the meaning than understanding it.

"Anchors away, then!" he cried in a voice that could be heard from one end of the hall to the other. Without giving her a chance to protest, he swept her off. It was, to borrow a phrase from the sailor-muleskinner, like being swept along under full sail before a stiff breeze. Nancy had never traveled so fast or so far, or with such utter abandon on a dance floor. It left her breathless, and the other dancers scattered before them like leaves before the wind. Nancy couldn't quite make up her mind whether she should give herself over to this experience with laughter, or be terribly embarrassed.

THE O'KEEFE didn't give her much choice. She was completely occupied in keeping up with him, and didn't have time or energy left to decide how she should react. Then he swept her out of the dance hall to the shadows of the balcony.

"Time to drop anchor for a spell," he smiled. "While you get your breath back."

The O'Keefe leaned a casual arm against the wall behind her. He stood very close and Nancy was acutely aware of his nearness. "That gentleman friend of yours is a sly one," he said.

Nancy was instantly alert. "Yes?"

"I knocked his topgallant—hat to you—into the dust, so he gets me fired."

"He did what?" Nancy demanded indignantly.

"Matter of fact," Bryan O'Keefe went on, "I owe him a voice of thanks. It'll give me more time to pursue you, lady, and let me warn you, Bryan O'Keefe doesn't take no for an answer."

With that, he gathered her in his great arms and kissed her. He kissed her with a passion and thoroughness that Nancy had never experienced before. It was like being

caught in a great wind and carried high over the earth. It was at once irresistible and compelling. Nancy was helpless in his embrace, she couldn't have resisted if she had wanted to, and the suddenness of it left her confused about whether she wanted to resist or not.

"I'd stop that if I were you," a cold, firm voice said, and it was sharp as a knife, cutting between the O'Keefe and Nancy and separating them. It was Philip MacKenzie.

"What's the matter, mate," Bryan O'Keefe said casually. "Can't the girl jump ship if she wants to?"

"Nancy," Philip said coldly and made a small motion with his hand, indicating that she should join him.

Whether or not Nancy was going to be angry with Bryan O'Keefe was one thing still for her to decide, but to be ordered around by Philip MacKenzie was a matter she need not reflect on.

"He says," she said changing the subject abruptly, "that you got him fired from his job."

Philip's eyes flashed. "If the rest of what he says has as much relation to the truth as that remark, I advise you to pay no attention to him at all."

"No reason for you to slip your cable," Bryan O'Keefe laughed. "And if you think the lass is wearing your colors, you're a deluded man, judging from that kiss I just got!"

For his answer, Philip moved forward quickly on cat feet, and uncurled a long, solid punch that landed squarely on Bryan O'Keefe's jaw. It rocked the big red-head back on his heels, and he shook his great head and gave a challenging laugh.

"Ahoy, so it's battle stations, my lad. I pity you!"

He looked with scorn at Philip's lank shape. He stood a good four inches taller and must have outweighed the young banker by forty pounds. "Strike your colors, lad. I don't want to stave your timbers, or dismast you. All I want is your girl."

"Over my dead body," Philip said quietly.

"Stop it, both of you!" Nancy cried, but neither paid the least attention to her.

"Then reap the hurricane!" Bryan O'Keefe roared in a terrible voice and charged into Philip. Nancy expected to see Philip bowled over and knocked flat. But he side-stepped the onslaught and rolled with the punch. She remembered that he was rumored to be a good boxer, but she didn't think any amount of skill could overcome the handicap of Bryan O'Keefe's size and brawn.

Up and down the balcony the battle raged, with the solid smack of connecting blows echoing hollowly in the night. Men and women crammed the doorways and hung out the windows enthralled, as the great giant of a man charged on the slighter one. Each time it happened, it seemed that surely the battle must end. But when the flury of fists was over, and they stepped apart, Philip was still standing there. He was panting, and the O'Keefe had opened a cut over his right eye and blood streamed down his thin face.

But the O'Keefe was not without the marks of battle, too. One ear was swelling painfully, and Philip was raining short jabs at it at every opportunity.

"Up the MacKenzie!" a man shouted, and a muleskinner yelled back, "Up the O'Keefe!" Nancy covered her ears with her hands to keep out the sound of the blows and the wild, bloodthirsty shouts.

Then she saw Philip back the bigger man against the side of the building and sink blow after blow, while the red-headed giant's body crashed against the wall and the building shook. With a roar, the O'Keefe tore himself free and swung a wild haymaker at Philip's head. The slighter man ducked and brought one up from the floor. It connected with the point of the big man's chin and he straightened to his full height. Coldly and deliberately, Philip measured him as O'Keefe stood semi-

stunned, and then delivered the final blow. It sent the giant backwards, and he crashed through the balcony railing and fell into space.

PHILIP TURNED, his arms hanging limp at his sides, the knuckles of his hands bruised and bleeding, his face swollen and discolored. He advanced resolutely on Nancy and swept her violently into his arms. "I'll show you what it is to be really kissed by a MacKenzie!" he cried through swollen lips.

For the second time that night, Nancy was swept into an embrace from which there was no escape. But this time, the suddenness of the attack did not leave her confused or suffering from conflicting emotions. Her blood pounded, her heart raced, and she found herself clinging shamelessly to Philip MacKenzie while she was swept into an ecstasy that was as dizzying as it was compelling. Never had she suspected the punctual, conventional Philip to be capable of such passion, and she yielded to the demand of his lips with heartfelt satisfaction.

"Now we'll get married," he said somewhat unsteadily.

Nancy stared at him uncertainly. This was an entirely different MacKenzie. "What about the house?" she stammered.

"First, we'll get married," he said and swayed slightly.

It reminded Nancy that the last she had seen of the O'Keefe was as he took off into thin air over the edge of the balcony. If Philip had killed him, there would be no marriage. "The O'Keefe!" she gasped.

Philip glared at her, "Never mind the O'Keefe!"

"But you may have killed him!" she wailed.

He staggered over to the broken railing, while Nancy supported him as best she could. Together they stared down to the street below. There lay the O'Keefe, his full length stretched in the dust, surrounded by a circle of anxious faces. But most astonishing of all, was that his great, red head was cradled in Else Bennett's lap.

Slowly he opened his eyes. He stared dazedly into Else's fragile face framed in soft curls. "An angel sent to bless me," he murmured and closed his eyes again.

"Are you all right?" Philip called.

The O'Keefe opened his eyes again. He raised one great ham of a hand and touched Else's cheek tenderly. "It'll take more than a MacKenzie to do for the O'Keefe." He turned his head happily in Else's lap.

Else didn't seem in the least eager to have him leave. She seemed content to hold the O'Keefe for as long as he might want to be held.

Philip turned back to Nancy, his lips curved in a painful smile. "I'll bet Else's father gives him a job. He's a brave man, and I wish him no harm." He looked earnestly at Nancy. "Matter of fact, I think I owe him a vote of thanks."

Nancy nestled close against Philip. "I think so, too," she murmured contentedly. Once she had seen the fire that burned beneath the punctual, conventional exterior, she would never again grow impatient with him.

"I hope we can get that house soon," she said.

He took her in his arms. "Any time," he sighed happily. "Sam Higglesby and I just closed a big deal tonight. I can afford the house any time, and the wife that goes with it."

"It's the house you want more than the wife, Philip MacKenzie, you lout!"

"You couldn't be more correct," he said and tightened his arms around her. Nancy could feel that wonderful happiness rising within her again.

"Then I'll be Mrs. Philip MacKenzie in no time at all."

"It was your consent I was waiting for," he said, and bent to kiss her lips, "but I sure had to try to lasso the man in the moon to get it." ♥ ♥ ♥

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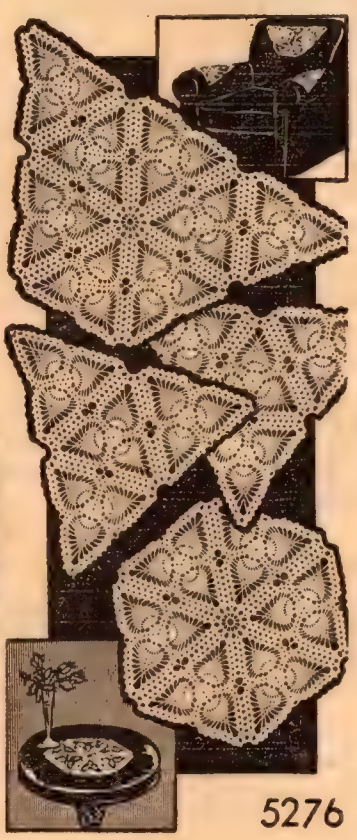

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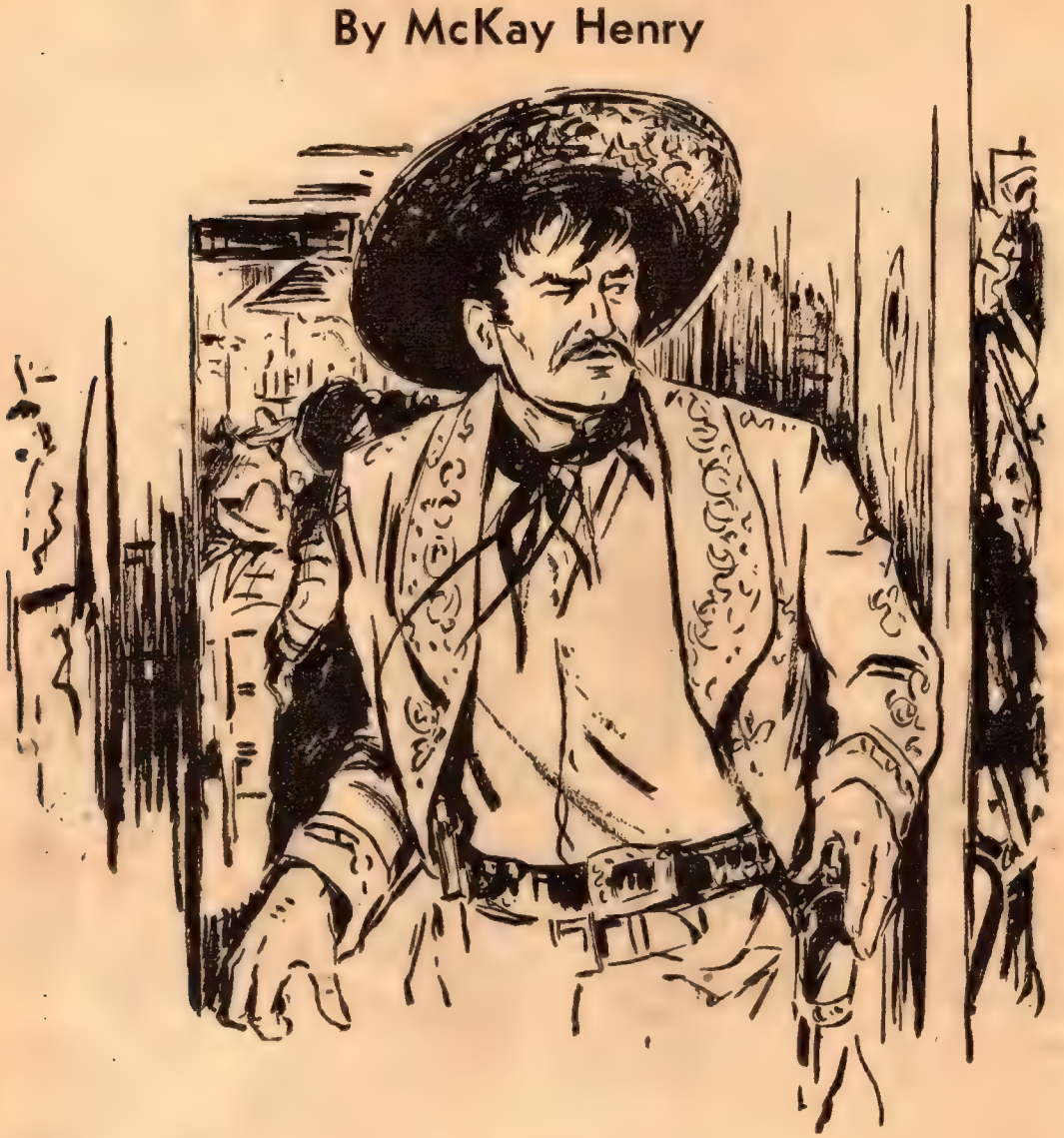
BRIDGE OF CARDS

By McKay Henry



Marza had given her heart to the faithless Americano—so she hurried through the night, carrying the fragments of her love, to where Don Fajardo was waiting. . . .

●

AS LIGHTLY as a sunbeam on the wild river below the village, Marza drifted through the motions of her dance and then clicked her heels joyously. But her dark eyes were troubled, and always she stared through the thick tobacco smoke that filled the cafe to the Americano, so sullenly slumped at a table with a bottle before him, as had become his custom in

There was peace in his arms and Marza's world swam about her.

the last few weeks that she had seen him.

"Bueno! Bueno! Give us more!" the audience cried when Marza, breathless, came to a halt and curtseyed very low.

Loudest with his applause was Don Fajardo, dark, swarthy, and very rich; about whom folks whispered many things. Marza didn't permit herself to think evil of anyone, even of Don Fajardo, or of the American engineer, Jack Wayne, who had bossed the construction of that great bridge up north—the bridge that had gone hurtling into a river with many people on it, because of faulty construction for which he was responsible, or so the Mexicans said.

"More! More!" Don Fajardo called, and from a corner where she drank with a patron, the other dancer in the cafe, the bold-

eyed girl whom the traveling Americans called "Calico," nodded to the orchestra, and Marza swung into an encore. This time she danced very close to Senor Jack-ee Wayne.

For almost three weeks, he'd come here every night, to sit sullenly with his bottle and a pack of cards, building a bridge of them across his table. He was heartbroken because his bridge had collapsed, the Mexicans whispered, and by building with cards he hoped to find the cause for the wreck. Not that it would help him; nobody would ever employ him again. Marza's gentle warm heart went out to him, but he was cold. Whenever she smiled at him, he just stared at her as if he didn't see her at all.

But he wasn't cold to other women, or so Calico said. Calico, the bold-eyed, who had known many men in a way that Marza was sure wasn't nice and certainly didn't approve of. Calico had whispered things.

"Jack Wayne isn't so tough! Take it from me, Marza. Why, he's come down to see me dozens of times after I've left the cafe. He's a fool, too—mooning over that wrecked bridge! But he says he likes me, and I like him."

"You—you mean he has keesed you?" Marza questioned, wide-eyed, for though she was a dancer in the cafe known as La Guitarra—the Guitar—she danced solely for the love of dancing. And she was very young, with a cloud of black, wind-blown hair that wouldn't stay within bounds, but fluttered out like a cloud.

It was as if the wind always blew in her hair—the wind of March, the month in which she had been born. And now, questioning Calico, she tried to pull some of that wild halo about her head tight, while she listened with a little thrill of anxiety to what Calico's answer would be.

"Kissed me? Sure!" the bold-eyed girl replied. "A good many times, Marza. And he's held me in his arms, many nights."

Marza, dancing near Jack-ee Wayne, thought now how pale and worn he looked, and how he must suffer because the bridge had collapsed. He leaned intently over his bridge of cards, bracing one against the other, and tonight there was something bewildering in his manner—almost as if he'd discovered something.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, in a sudden, loud voice, and half rose out of his chair.

And at that moment Marza's long hair, fluttering, struck the bridge of cards and scattered it.

Her feet missed a beat when she saw the fury that splashed Jack Wayne's face white as ashes. His brown hands came up, unclosing, as if to strangle her. Fear of a sort that Marza had never felt before; a paralyzing, yet curious, dread took so great a hold on her that she turned and fled towards her dressing room.

She ignored the cries of "More! More!" and darted down the long, dark hall to the wing of the building where she and Calico dressed. As she ran, she was conscious of hurrying footsteps behind her and she knew that Señor Jack Wayne pursued her. She knew too that there was fury in his heart because she had knocked down his bridge, just when he had discovered some engineering principle which he'd been seeking for weeks.

"You little hell-cat! Knock down my bridge, will you?"

It was the first time she had heard his voice, and it wasn't particularly pleasant now. Fear froze Marza's heart as she rushed into the dressing room and slammed the door behind her. She threw herself against it, feeling for the bolt, but before she could lock it, Jack Wayne's weight burst it open.

He was tall, with amazingly blue eyes and hair the color of sand. He reeled into the room and his hands closed and unclosed convulsively, but he didn't shout, as Marza half-expected him to. At last he seemed to regain control of himself with visible effort.

"For three weeks, I've been experiment-

ing with ways to brace those cards!" he said. "If a card will stand up braced, a bridge will stand up. Tonight I discovered the way, and then you knocked my bridge down before I could remember it."

"I, I am sorry, Señor," Marza whimpered, cowering back.

"I ought to beat you!" Wayne burst out darkly. "You knocked down my bridge just when I was about to discover something."

"Oh, I deed not mean to, Señor."

Jack Wayne's brown hands came forward towards Marza's throat. Genuine fear spread through her, and she heard the little scream that burst from her red lips. She couldn't move; she just stood there, frozen, while Wayne's fingers closed around her throat. Then surprisingly his hands slipped down to her slender shoulders, and his lips were warm and vital against hers with a fury that was devastating.

MARZA GASPED in surprise because she'd fully expected to be beaten and probably because she had deserved it. But instead Señor Jack-ee Wayne kissed her in a manner that certainly didn't mean he was furious with her. His kiss told her of love, and yearning, and caring.

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee!" she gasped again. Then she couldn't make another sound because his arms slipped from her shoulders down around her waist, and she was held so tightly she could hardly breathe. His lips pressed against hers painfully, but it was a very delightful and stirring pain.

She should break away, she knew. Calico had said that this man had visited her and held her in his arms. That alone made him unfit for Marza, or so she thought. But while his lips burned on hers, and she was close to him, she forgot Calico's stories and knew that all these nights she'd been dancing in La Guitarra and shyly watching Jack Wayne and pitying him, an emotion had been born in her—an emotion she now found a name for.

"I—Oh, I love you, Señor Jack-ee Wayne!" she said to herself.

Almost as if he'd heard her, Señor Wayne lifted his lips and burst out, "I'm sorry, Marza. I was furious when you knocked over my bridge of cards! I guess I wanted to hurt you, but when I put my hands on you, it—well, I've been watching you, Marza, watching you all these nights."

"You deed not even smile at me, when I smiled at you!" Marza accused.

"Marza, I reckon I'm not worth your smiles. You know that the Mexicans say I built a bridge so badly that it collapsed and killed many people. That's why I came down here—to try to forget. But Marza, that bridge was good! It was tampered with and that's why it collapsed. It *was* a good bridge Marza, you believe that, don't you?"

Of course she believed it. She'd believe anything that the blond American would tell her now, because she loved him and would love him no matter what he had done in the past.

"Marza, I've wanted to return your smiles—to talk to you, but—Marza, I'll not hold back any longer! I—I love you, little Marza."

"And I—I love you, too, Señor Jack-ee Wayne."

"Marza! Sweetheart!"

Again, Señor Jack's arms tightened around Marza's slender shoulders and his mouth came down hungrily against hers. She surrendered to him, returning his kisses with an intensity equal to his own. She brought her arms up around him, though she had to stand on tiptoe to do it. Minutes raced by, many of them, and still she strained herself against Señor Jack, drinking in every bit of ecstasy of this moment. It was as if she lived in a world where there was no pain, no sorrow, no Don Fajardo, Calico, or La Guitarra—a world of delight from which she wanted never to escape.

Too soon, Señor Jack lifted his lips and

stared with bright blue eyes into her dark ones. His eyes tightened for an instant, then relaxed. He moved back and laughed a little, as if shaken. And Marza likewise stepped back, so thoroughly stirred that her pulses were leaping and her heart soared like the eagles in the mountains across the river.

"Marza! Marza!" Señor Jack said softly, as if in wonder, "Marza! That's March in English, isn't it? Your hair swirls as if it has the winds of March in it."

"I was born in the month you Americans call March, Señor Jack-ee!" Marza returned. "And eef you still weesh to beat me, because I 'ave knocked down your bridge of cards, I weel let you."

Señor Jack laughed, a very pleasant laugh that sent a very pleasant sensation through Marza.

"I'm all over my bad temper," he said. "It doesn't matter! I'll discover that idea again, sometime."

"Oh, you weel build bridges again, Jack-ee!" Marza cried, "I know you weel! Just because one seengle bridge 'ave fall and people blame you—"

She brought her hand up to her forehead and away, very damp. "Eet ees very hot!" she said, "Eet ees too hot! The desert, all the feed for the cattle, she burn oop!"

"There's feed for the cattle in the mountains across the river," Señor Jack-ee suggested, "but the cattle can't swim that wild water! If they had a bridge, the *rancheros* could drive them across."

His face darkened. The idea of a bridge seemed to irritate him. Marza hastened to change the subject to one much nicer, much more thrilling, to think about—love. . . .

"Your leeps, they are very soft, Señor Jack-ee."

"Want to kiss me again?" Jack asked, half jesting. Marza nodded eagerly, and again Jack's mouth sought hers. His arms crowded around her slender shoulders with a hunger so thrilling that Marza completely forgot where she was. She yearned to remain in Señor Jack-ee's delightful embrace forever and ever.

"Marza, I love you! I reckon I've loved you ever since I strayed into the cafe and saw you dancing, light as a dove and looking like an angel."

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee, I 'ave loved you too!" Marza cried. "I watched you night after night, wondering at you because you were so very unhappy."

"I'm worried about that wrecked bridge!" Jack declared, jaw tightening, "But I don't want to think of it now, Marza. I just want to hold you in my arms like this and kiss you. I'll love you always."

"You mus' not theenk of the breedge. Jus' theenk of me."

"I love you, Marza!"

"And I— Oh, Señor Jack-ee, how I love you!"

She loved him with all her warm Spanish heart, with all her wild Spanish soul. So she huddled against him, her lips on his, whispering, "I weel love you for always, Señor Jack-ee, for as long as the river shall run."

"And I'll always love you, Marza. Remember that."

Then for a little while, his lips on hers, Marza's world swam about and she forgot that she was in the dressing-room of La Guitarra. But she remembered it when the door opened and a harsh voice rasped out, "You work fast, Señor Americano, too fast to suit me!"

Marza wriggled away from Jack and spun to face a dark-faced, thin-lipped man, about whom folks in the settlement whispered dark things that she didn't believe, because she would never believe evil of anybody. It was Don Fajardo!

"Oh, eet ees you, Don Fajardo," she faltered.

SHE WAS frightened, not in the same way that she had been afraid of Jack when he followed her, and this fear was little needles of ice all along her spine. She

thought, *How furiously Don Fajardo and Señor Jack stare at each other—like two hostile animals!*

Marza hadn't known that they were acquainted with each other, but now that she did, she saw that they hated each other and she turned a little sick. She didn't like hate or fury. All she wanted was to remain in Señor Jack-ee's arms forever and ever, loving him always.

She had found peace in Señor Jack-ee's arms, but her American certainly wasn't peaceful as he stared at Don Fajardo and snapped out, "Can't I go anywhere without having you around, Fajardo? I don't like you.—I warned you to stay away from me, up north."

"Ah, yes, up north!" Fajardo returned, in his low, dangerous voice. "I knew the Americano señor when he built a bridge, a bridge that was faulty, one that collapsed and killed many people."

Marza almost screamed when she saw the fury that appeared in Señor Jack-ee's face and the frosty light that came into his bright, blue eyes. Involuntarily, her hand went out to grasp his arm, and the light touch seemed to calm him. He swallowed, and was silent for a moment until he could speak calmly.

"You know there was nothing wrong with that bridge, Fajardo! You know it collapsed because someone tampered with it; somebody who wanted to see it collapse. It was probably someone who had a financial stake in its destruction. You were losing money because the bridge took trade away from your ranch stores. You were glad when it collapsed."

"Ees the American señor saying I made the bridge fall?" Don Fajardo suggested, not lifting his voice, but uttering the words in the same deadly tone as a diamondback's warning hiss.

"I'm not saying it outright, Fajardo, but I know you stood to profit the most of any man from the collapse of that bridge. I've suspected you and maybe some day I'll have proof enough to back up my theory."

Don Fajardo shrugged his shoulders negligently. "The bridge fell because eet was not built right! The Americano claims to be an engineer, but he knows leetle of the building of bridges."

Again Marza's light touch on her Americano's arm seemed to reassure him, and in the few minutes of silence following, he began to breathe easier, as if his fury diminished. Marza, looking up at him, felt glad when the frosty light went out of his bright, blue eyes.

"Oh, please, my Señor Jack-ee, do not grow too angry at Don Fajardo!" she whispered to herself. "Do not suspicion heem too much! You are bitter because your breedge, she 'ave fallen, but you should not suspicion everyone.

It wasn't that she liked Don Fajardo especially; she didn't, really. He was too oily and smooth, too dark of face and sinister of lip. But, balanced against that, he was very rich, and he could do much for her poor relatives who had made many sacrifices so that she might learn to dance. She owed them a debt, and if Don Fajardo looked with favor upon her, he might give them jobs, which they needed very badly.

In this moment she recalled something that Calico had said once, in her hard-boiled, calculating way, "Looks to me, kid, like this Fajardo likes you. If I were you, I'd play him for all I could get out of him."

"Oh, no!" Marza remembered she had protested, "He ees nice to me just because I do not theenk heem a bad man like most people do. And I would not, as you say, play him for all I can get out of him. Not heem or any man."

But what was Don Fajardo saying? And what was that look in her Americano's eyes?

"Americano, I'm a powerful man in this country! The people here sell all their cattle to me, and I send the cattle to my ranches up north."

"I can't say that I'm interested in that!"

Jack returned, and his blue eyes flashed.

"I say eet so that you weel understand that I have the power to run you out of this country. I say eet because, Americano, I like thees girl, Marza, and I do not like men who kiss her and fondle her as you now did. I am warning you—leave Marza alone."

Marza tilted up her little chin defiantly and felt the curious heat of temper spreading in her veins. Don Fajardo had no right to talk this way to her American—the man she loved! Of course Señor Jack had the right to kiss and fondle her, didn't they love each other? It was no business of Don Fajardo's. The dark-faced Mexican went too far in his threat. It didn't matter now that he was so very rich and could help her relatives. She would help them, somehow, herself!

She opened her lips to make some heated remark, then restrained herself. But of course she did not need to talk for herself, Señor Jack would do that. He'd laugh in Don Fajardo's face, and snap his fingers at the warning. She thought, *The conceit of Don Fajardo, thinking he could cower Señor Jack-ee.*

And then her temper drained and little needles of ice stabbed at her spine again. Señor Jack didn't say a word, he just stared furiously at Don Fajardo for a moment, and then to Marza's great disappointment, he dropped his eyes.

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee, what ees the matter?" something in Marza cried out. "Why do you not tell heem that you love me and that hees warning means nothing to you? Why?"

"You weel keep away from thees girl as long as you are in thees country!" Don Fajardo repeated, "Do I make myself clear, Americano?"

THERE WAS a bitter challenge in the tone, as if Don Fajardo would welcome some resistance. But Señor Jack-ee did not speak, nor did he look at Marza. *Oh, Señor Jack-ee, why do you not tell him you love me,* Marza thought. That temper of his should rise, he should speak scornfully to the dark-faced man, and if Don Fajardo offered insult, throw him from the dressing room. Marza would have welcomed that. But Señor Jack-ee said nothing—not a word.

A minute went by, perhaps two, then Señor Jack said, almost lamely, "You can't bluff me, Fajardo!" Marza's heart soared at the thought that he would throw Fajardo's warning back in his teeth, then sank when her American turned abruptly on his heel and left the room.

"*Remember!*" Don Fajardo called thinly after him.

He turned to Marza, his eyes slitted close. His manner changed suddenly from defiance to almost pleading, and his voice was as soft as any Marza had ever heard.

"I—I am sorry, Marza! But, I—when I found you in his arms, I was very angry!"

Marza returned, in the Spanish tones into which Don Fajardo had dropped, "You had no right to talk thus to him, Don Fajardo! No right at all."

"But I think I had, Marza!" the dark-faced man returned. He took a step forward and caught both Marza's hands in his. "I love you, Marza. I love you very much. I've loved you for a long time, and I wish you to marry me, Marza. I wish you to marry me soon!"

"Oh, I—" Marza gasped.

Her knees weakened and she dropped into a chair. This was really too much. Two proposals in a night—one from the tall Americano whom she loved, the other from a Mejicano whom she didn't dislike, but could never marry, not while she loved another.

So she said, eyes downcast primly, attempting to escape from Don Fajardo's hands, "I— I thank you very much, Don Fajardo, but I—I really cannot marry you. I—"

"Is it that you hate me?" Don Fajardo

almost snarled. He dropped down on one knee and looked up into Marza's face. "I wish very much to have you as my wife, Marza. I am rich. I buy many cattle from the *rancheros* here. I have ranches to the north. I have stores on those ranches, and make much money from the *rancheros* who must buy from me because they cannot go such a long distance to town. Marza, I will give you jewels, fine dresses, carriages, and servants."

But she loved Señor Jack-ee Wayne, the Americano, even though he hadn't a cent and what was worse, no prospects. He could never help her relatives. And she loved him in spite of the fact that he'd refused to challenge the powerful Don Fajardo with the truth that Marza loved him. She'd love him always. No matter that he had acted so strangely and that her heart was bewildered and a little hurt because of it.

So she repeated, "No—no, I cannot marry you, Don Fajardo. I—I really cannot."

"Is it that you hate me?" Don Fajardo repeated.

"I— Oh, no. I do not hate you. I—I theenk you are as the Americanos say 'all right,' but I cannot marry you."

"But why?"

Marza opened her lips to say that she loved another and then closed them very firmly. If Señor Jack-ee wouldn't tell Don Fajardo, why should she? Perhaps Señor Jack-ee had some reason for remaining silent. If that were so, she must say nothing. So she shook her head, while Don Fajardo pleaded again and again. When he could get no answer he at last lifted himself upright and backed to the door.

"I am sorry, Marza," he said in a low voice. "but please remember this—if ever you should change your mind, come to me. Come at once! I will be waiting for you with arms that are open."

Then he disappeared down the dark hall. Marza, so bewildered that she could hardly think straight, began automatically to undress—long skirted dress, mantilla, high-heeled slippers—and put on a less ornate street costume.

Her heart throbbed in a most curious way. She didn't know if it was disappointment in her Americano, or excitement because of her two proposals. Sometimes, when she remembered Señor Jack-ee's retreat, she felt both angry and hurt. But of course he had some reason for his actions. She'd see him tomorrow, and find out.

But she didn't see him tomorrow. A hot wind greeted her at dawn, and when she went down the street she met many of the *rancheros*, somber-faced. Someone said, "This is the end of the grass. Our cattle will die."

"But there is good grass across the river in the mountains!" somebody else returned, "The problem is, how can we get them across that wild river? They will be dashed to pieces."

And a third person said, "Don Fajardo is willing to buy them right now, thin as they are. He has water and grass across the desert to the west where he can take them before they die."

There was a sullen grumble at the mention of Don Fajardo. Marza could guess why. Don Fajardo had, indeed, ranches to the west where he could save the cattle of the *rancheros*, if he owned them. Here was his chance to make a great deal of money. The *rancheros* must sell if they didn't want their cattle to die, and Don Fajardo, without doubt, offered them only a small fraction of what the cattle were really worth.

"He offers us very little," a man grumbled. "We will face ruin if we sell to him, but it begins to look as if we have no choice unless we can get our cattle across the river and into the grass in the mountains.

"If only we had a bridge."

And as one man, a couple of *rancheros* shouted, "A bridge! We will build a

bridge for the cattle to go across the river."

"But there is no man in the country who knows how to build a bridge strong enough to stand the weight of many cattle," someone protested, but he was drowned out instantly by shouts of "The Americano! He does not build bridges very well, but surely he can build a bridge strong enough to carry our cattle!"

MARZA WENT ON, searching the streets for her Americano. She dreaded to see him, yet she yearned for him—a curious sensation and delightful, too, as if she bubbled over inside. Oh, Señor Jack-ee, her heart sang. Señor Jack-ee, I love you!

But underneath there was gloom, she asked herself. *Why had he acted so strangely last night?*

She couldn't find him anywhere. An hour later she went into La Guitarra, silent as the morning. The bartender greeted her cordially and asked if she'd heard the news. "The men build a bridge across the river. The Americano bosses them. They build it very fast!"

So, already the rancheros had begun work, Marza thought. She hastened out of La Guitarra down to the river. There, at the narrowest part, a hundred or more men worked furiously, and more joined them all the time. Teams hauled long timbers down to the bank, and several Mexicans were adjusting some sort of a derrick. Marza's eyes darted here and there eagerly, seeking the man she loved. At last she saw him, his blond head bare in the bright sunlight, a table before him, and big sheets of paper upon which he drew plans. Occasionally, he issued an order and then men swarmed to do his bidding.

"Oh, Jack-ee, Señor Jack-ee!" Marza said aloud. "Señor Jack-ee, I love you."

The river roared so that she couldn't hear her voice, but she did hear another voice. It was that of a man, piercing clearly above the rush of the wild waters below. She turned quickly. The man who had come up without a sound and he stared past Marza in a way that frightened her a little.

It was Don Fajardo.

"They think to save their cattle, but their bridge will never stand. Then they must sell to me at my price, and I will make much money." And he added, his curious look turning to her, "I will give you that money, Marza, if you will marry me."

"But I—I have told you, Don Fajardo, that I cannot marry you."

Don Fajardo motioned for Marza to follow him and she obeyed. Beyond the sound of the river's roar, he halted.

"Marza, I know why you will not marry me. I know it is because of the Americano. Last night, you kissed his lips willingly, you permitted him to hold you in his arms willingly. You love him!"

And Marza didn't deny it, knowing she never could. And besides, why should she? She wasn't ashamed of her love, not Señor Jack-ee's love. He loved her with all the fervor she felt for him and it would be absurd to deny such love.

"I love him." she returned, simply.

Don Fajardo's lips tightened and when he spoke his voice was very low, but shot through with a grimness bewildering to Marza. "You love him," he repeated. "Marza, you're very young and your knowledge of men is but small. Listen to me, my little Marza, the Americano is no good. He breaks hearts as easily as he breathes, and it grieves me that he should break your heart. You are nothing to him."

A flush of rage fluttered along Marza's veins, and she leaped to Señor Jack's defense. Of course she was something to him, she was all the world to him. Hadn't his lips said that, and his eyes, and his words when he asked her to marry him? How silly of Don Fajardo to tell her otherwise.

"That is not true, Don Fajardo. It is not true at all. Why, he has asked me to marry him and that I will do!"

"Marza, listen to me. You will never marry the Americano. I am sure of that, as sure as I stand here. The Americano is false, he tells sweet lies to many of the girls. He tells them all he loves them.

"Oh, that's not true!" Marza cried. But deep inside her, something that wasn't pleasant stirred, a faint suspicion based upon the way Señor Jack-ee had backed down from Don Fajardo's challenge last night. Perhaps her Americano just played with her and didn't consider her worth fighting for.

"No, oh, no!" something within her cried out, and aloud she repeated, "It is not true, Don Fajardo. You speak an untruth."

"You think so?" the dark-faced man returned. "Then I will prove it to you. You say the Americano loves you alone. I say he makes false love to many women. And to prove it— You know where the Americano lives, in the *casa* beyond the town square? Go there tonight, after he has gone home. He cannot work tonight, for these nights are moonless and even with flares his men could not work. He will be at his *casa,* and he will not be alone."

"Not alone," Marza whispered, her throat suddenly dry.

"There is another dancer in La Guitarra, the woman Calico. He makes love to her, also. Much more violent love than to you, my little Marza, for Calico goes to him often at night and does not leave until dawn. Tonight she will be there. I am sure of that. Go see for yourself, see him kiss Calico, see Calico in his arms, and know that Calico will not leave until dawn."

How absurd. Of course Señor Jack-ee cared nothing for Calico, and Calico never went to his house. Lies, all lies—and yet—

Hadn't Calico whispered to her of things shocking to Marza, whispers that Marza wouldn't permit herself to believe, of secret visits to Señor Jack, of the warmth of his arms, his kisses, the fact that she hadn't left him all night long. Marza threw back her little chin. Lies, all lies, and yet—

"You half believe, do you not?" Don Fajardo pressed. "I do not expect you to believe, Marza, until your own eyes have seen. Therefore, go to the *casa* of the Americano late tonight when all the town is in bed, and see him in the arms of Calico."

MARZA'S THROAT was dry as the dust drifting over the desert, but she forced herself to laugh. "You are wrong, Don Fajardo," she cried, "very, very wrong!" And she added, in a burst of bravado, "If that is so, I will come to you, Don Fajardo, and marry you!"

"Is that a promise?" Don Fajardo demanded.

Marza shook with fear, so intent was Don Fajardo in his question. Then her fear eased. Of course she hadn't anything to dread. Señor Jack-ee, in spite of her apprehensions, was true to her. Fajardo's words were all lies.

"Yes, it is a promise," she said very clearly. "If—if Señor Jack-ee is false to me, I will marry you."

"Good!"

Just the one word was all Don Fajardo said. Then he drifted away and Marza fell to watching the progress of the bridge. The men worked furiously and built it very quickly. They dropped timber after timber into place, and each timber seemed to fit, for Jack had gauged its length and the position it would occupy. Already, a tall, thin column thrust out over the water. While Marza watched, men threw ropes across to the opposite bank, lashed them into place, and the speed of building accelerated.

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee," Marza breathed, "I—oh, I hope this bridge is strong and will not fall under the weight of the cattle."

It would be a very rough bridge, of course, and its strength would depend

more than anything else upon the way Jack braced it. Marza was sorry she'd knocked down her American's bridge of cards last night, for hadn't he discovered some method of bracing new to engineers? Perhaps he might have applied it to this bridge that meant so much to him, for if it was successful, people would again consider him a great engineer.

"Oh, he *must* build a strong bridge," Marza prayed.

Then she remembered the lies Don Fajardo had told her, and she was suddenly cold inside. They were lies, of course, untruths of the rankest sort, and she shouldn't permit herself to even consider them. And still she wouldn't be satisfied until she had proved to herself that they were lies. Marza tossed her small, firm chin and cried out a promise to herself. "I weel go to Señor Jack-ee's house tonight, and I weel see for myself that he ees alone. And then never, never again weel I believe heem unfaithful."

She didn't try to see Jack that afternoon, but lingered around La Guitarra. She didn't feel like dancing, and it so happened that the manager was good-humored enough to excuse her. She went home at dusk, sat there as the darkness grew blacker, and thought of Señor Jack-ee and Don Fajardo's lies.

The settlement, after a burst of activity when the men ceased work on the bridge, quieted and at midnight lay black under a sky thick with clouds. Marza threw a shawl around the glossy storm of her hair and, hands trembling a little as she held it close under her chin, went out and down the street towards the *casa* of Señor Jack-ee Wayne. Dust seeped up thinly to her nostrils, and a dry, hot wind whispered from the desert to play with her shawl. And with each step she took, a little bit of ice around her heart tightened more and more.

Oh, thees ees silly, she thought, breathing very hard, *I— There ees nothing to fear! Nothing at all. I am being so silly.*

Then the *casa* of Señor Jack loomed dark and rough just ahead. On silent feet, Marza drifted around the blank wall to the door. Light spilled between the slats across the upper part of the door, and by this, Marza knew her Americano was at home. She'd been hoping unconsciously that he would not be.

Marza peered between the slats, guiltily, for this wasn't a nice thing to do, she knew—spying. But she must prove to herself that Señor Jack-ee was without guilt.

"Oh, Madre," she whispered, "please forgeeve me for thees spying! But I mus' prove that Señor Jack-ee ees alone, as I know him to be."

Sure enough, Señor Jack-ee was lying there on a bed, his shirt off, and his brown shoulders gleaming in the light of the overhead lamp. But how queerly he lay. Marza shook with the alarm that came to temper her joy, and hastily she threw open the door to rush in.

"Señor Jack-ee. Oh, Señor Jack-ee," she called.

"Well, Marza?"

The voice of another woman—Calico.

Marza turned slowly from Señor Jack, all life seeming to drain from her at once. The bold-eyed girl, Calico, stood there in the arch to another room, a cigarette between her lips, a bottle in one hand, and very few clothes on her.

"Well, Marza, what d'you want?" Calico demanded. "Why aren't you in bed, little girl." There was a jeer to her voice. Marza felt the blood rush up her cheeks, and in a desperate attempt to retain her dignity she drew herself very straight and as tall as she could.

"I—I thought to see Señor Jack," she faltered.

"Get out!" Calico snapped, dropping her cigarette. She shifted a little, drawing her scanty clothes around her. "You've no business here. Go home. I don't like people breaking into my parties."

"But—but I—I do not understan'." Marza faltered, from the depths of a cold void that was forming around her heart.

"There's nothing to explain. The Americano's my sweetheart and has been for a long time. I always come here nights. You little fool! You had a crush on him, didn't you? Well, grow up and learn things. Americanos don't go for little Spanish girls like you, they like someone with fire—someone like me."

"But he—he told me he lov' me."

MARZA TURNED on legs suddenly as limp as empty sacks, to Señor Jack-ee. He hadn't moved. He just lay there on the bed, the lampglow on his shoulders. His eyes were wide open and he breathed very hard, almost as if he'd just been running.

"I—I weesh you luck, Señor," Marza whispered. "I—I thought you lov' me, but now that I know you do not, I—I weesh you luck. I—I weesh you to know I do not hate you."

"Get out!" Calico shouted.

But Señor Jack stirred. He reached out one hand to grasp the bed end, and he drew himself almost upright. His eyes stared at Marza. And how queerly—almost as if he didn't recognize her.

"You—Marza," he muttered, and then his chin dropped.

"He's drunk!" Calico snapped, "and what I said a minute ago about getting out still goes, Marza. Go home and grow up!"

"I—I weel go."

And Marza went, slowly, as if some tremendous invisible weight bowed her slender shoulders, a weight almost too heavy for her to endure. She moved as if lifeless, as if she didn't have a heart to give her body warmth. And indeed, where her heart once had been, there was a heart no longer; just a leaden something that swung like a lifeless pendulum without hope or love, back and forth, back and forth.

It kept time with her dragging steps as she went through the dust towards her room in the *casa* of an old friend of hers. The wind blew hotter than ever, and the night seemed darker than ink—a vast well of heartbreak. Oh, Señor Jack-ee, why did you do this to me, something in Marza cried. Why—why—why?"

"I—I loved you, Señor Jack-ee!" she said aloud. "I—I loved you. I weel always love you, though I mus' forget you."

There was a curious, salty warmth on her lips and she realized for the first time that she was crying. Then, something within her broke, and she leaned against the wall of a house to sob her heart out—only she hadn't a heart, and the tears that came forth were very bitter tears.

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee. I—I loved you!"

Hours later, it seemed to her though it was only after one, the last of her tears drained away and she wiped her eyes on her shawl. She must forget Señor Jack-ee, of course. No use crying over something that was over. No use wailing because she'd been what Calico called her, a little fool. She'd let herself be deceived by an Americano's slick tongue—the words of a man who didn't love her, but who merely played with her because she amused him momentarily.

"I—I mus' forget heem."

And suddenly Marza's back straightened and her mouth grew very firm, for she knew instantly what she would do. There was another man who wanted to marry her—a man to whom she'd pledged herself if she found Señor Jack false—Don Fajardo.

And she wouldn't hesitate. She would go to him now, tonight, and tell him she would marry him.

"He—he wants me," she panted. "He—he weel have me. I—oh, Don Fajardo, I weel make you a good wife. I weel please you."

Don Fajardo lived in a big house, a hundred or more yards beyond the settlement, and Marza hastened in that direc-

tion. She stumbled a little at first, but by now the clouds over the sky had parted a little. Faint starglow seeped through, enough to enable her to see the ruts in the road. Marza presently began to run, dust clouding up to her hair. She didn't care. Anything to keep that pain out of the empty space where her heart had been, anything to keep her from remembering the man whose lips had been so warm against hers, whose words had been so thrilling and false.

ONLY A FEW yards from Don Fajardo's *casa* Marza halted, panting for breath. And as she hesitated, very still, she saw a door swing open and a man come out. He appeared heavily laden, Marza couldn't see with what. But she could see that it was Don Fajardo. There was something furtive about him that stifled her call and while she hesitated, he headed out over the desert towards the *rio*.

But what could the great and rich Don Fajardo be wanting at the *rio* this time of the night, Marza wondered, and then forgot. It didn't matter. All that she wanted now was to lay herself at Don Fajardo's feet, swearing to be a good wife to him for the rest of her days. She wanted to forget an Americano's warm lips and strong arms that had been untrue to her.

"Don Fajardo!" she called, but there was a lump in her throat and her voice didn't come out very loud. Don Fajardo failed to hear. Then he disappeared into the dark and Marza ran after him.

She lost him in the darkness and stumbled on and on, then she glimpsed him again, far away, and went as fast as she could in his direction. But she lost him again, and when she sighted him once more, he stood on the edge of the *rio*, just below the bridge. He seemed to be deep in thought, for Marza, though she couldn't see, had the impression that he stared calculatingly up at the structure, at Señor Wayne's bridge, which meant so much to the cattlemen trying to save their cattle.

"Don Fajardo!" Marza called, but this time the sound of the *rio* drowned her voice. She ran forward, up to within a few yards of Don Fajardo, and then halted when he lifted several small, white sticks from a pack and uncoiled a length of black, wiry cord. Marza recognized them instantly. Her breath went out in a gasp.

"Oh!"

Dynamite sticks and a fuse. Nor did it take much imagination to know what Don Fajardo intended to do. He was going to blow up the bridge.

"Oh, Don Fajardo," Marza whispered, "You—you too are a bad man. You are a very bad man, just like the Americano. And I—I cannot marry you."

The wife of Don Fajardo—a dynamiter. How closely she'd avoided that fate. The things they whispered about Don Fajardo *were* true. He *was* a bad man, who would do anything to make money, a very wicked man indeed. Though it began to seem as if all the men Marza knew were wicked.

She turned to creep away and loosed a stone that went clattering down upon Don Fajardo. He was hunched over his dynamite and fuse, but he rocketed upright and spun to face Marza. She huddled against the gray earth, hoping she'd not be seen, but Don Fajardo's eyes were sharp and he spotted her instantly. He dropped his explosive, came towards her so swiftly that she had only time to flee a few yards before he overtook her.

"Ah, Marza," he rasped in such a hard voice that Marza was afraid. "You have seen what I am about to do, eh? You must watch the rest of this. You must watch while the bridge topples into the river."

"Please, oh please," Marza panted, fighting agaist Don Fajardo's steel grip, "Let me go. I—I saw nothing."

"Nothing, eh?" Don Fajaro returned. Gone was the wheedling tone in his voice, the softness Marza had always thought a part of him. He was like a wolf now, and

even his lips seemed to curl with cruelty.

"You saw nothing, eh?" he repeated, "You spy. You see this bundle of dynamite sticks, you see this fuse all cut for a match —a bomb that will blow down this bridge. You see that?"

Marza nodded.

"Yet you say you saw nothing. But you have seen enough to send me to prison for the rest of my life. And nobody shall do that. Men who know what I have done, they are dead, as you shall be."

Marza screamed then, a full-throated wail with all the force of her lungs behind it. The sound throbbed above the roar of the *rio* and up out of the canyon. Don Fajardo cupped his hand roughly over Marza's mouth.

"You fool! You shall not scream like that again! But, no matter. They will not find you."

"What will you do with me?"

"In a few minutes, I will blow out the main support of this bridge and then it will topple into the river. I will put much earth around the dynamite, so the sound it makes will not be loud. And then, when they find the bridge has fallen, they will say it fell of its own weight—because the Americano did not know to build bridges."

"Like another bridge up north?"

"Ah, yes. Just like the Americano's other bridge. *I* blew that up too. While the river was unbridged, the ranchers in all the country had to come to me for supplies. But when it was finished, they could go other places. So I blew up the bridge, just as I blow this to pieces so the cattlemen must sell their cattle to me."

And he added, hard-lipped, "I shall tie you to a timber and when it goes into the river—"

"But she won't be tied to it, then!"

THE WORDS CAME, clear as a bell, from the darkness. Don Fajardo threw Marza to one side, spun about, and at the same instant drew a gun. Fury contorted his face. Marza felt a sob shake her, for she recognized that voice. Señor Jack was here.

He came from the dark, starglow on his bare shoulders. His hands were weaponless, but he walked forward without fear.

"I heard that, Don Fajardo." He didn't look at Marza, but fumbled in his pocket and presently brought forth a battered cigar. He lighted it, flame glowing for an instant across his stern face. A curious action, when the death in Don Fajardo's hands menaced him. But then, Marza thought, he was such a very strange man.

"I keel you, Señor," Don Fajardo almost screamed. "Eeet ees not good that you so calmly light a cigar."

"Better watch your English," Señor Jack returned, almost casually. "It isn't too good. So you blew down that bridge up north, eh? I always suspected it. And now I have proof, you confessed to Marza."

"But you weel nevair leeve to tell the story."

"And while we're at it, you'd better tell Marza something else, Fajardo. Tell her about Calico, for instance, how you hired her to come down to my place tonight and pretend to know me very well, just for Marza's benefit."

Something thumped very hard inside Marza, perhaps it was her heart. But she didn't have a heart, for Señor Jack-ee had torn it from her. Nevertheless, a warmth poured through her, and thrilled her as she listened to Don Fajardo's vicious snarl.

"Why should she not know? It does nobody any good, for both of you, knowing my secret now, must die. I weeshed thees Marza ver' much, for she is beautiful, and I 'ave gambling places up north where men would come to see her. And today I say to her that eef she fin' you unfaithful she mus' marry me."

"And so you hired Calico," Señor Jack said, puffing so furiously on his cigar that the tip of it glowed like a small fire.

"Calico came to my place tonight. I tried to get rid of her and she offered to go if I'd take a drink with her. She dropped something in the drink. It wasn't quite strong enough, Fajardo. It knocked me out, but not enough. Marza came to my place, saw me with Calico. The sight of her shocked me sober. I made Calico confess."

"You two mus' die. Firs' I weel shoot you, Americano, and then I weel tie Marza to a timber, and both of you weel disappear in the river."

Excited bubbles of warmth seemed to fill Marza. There was something beating inside her again—her heart had suddenly come back to her. Señor Jack-ee wasn't a false Americano. His arms were warm with a real warmth, his lips loving with a real love.

"Oh, Señor Jack-ee," Marza breathed, so excitedly that she didn't notice her Americano flip the cigar to the ground.

"You weel eat lead, Americano!" Don Fajardo almost screamed, swinging his gun dead center on Jack's heart.

Marza tried to scream, but no sound came. She brought a clenched fist up to her mouth, crushed her lips. Señor Jack-ee to die—oh, no! But the gun pointed at him and Don Fajardo's trigger finger tightened.

"Hear that hissing?" Senor Jack said suddenly. "Fajardo, I just threw my cigar away, onto your fuse." His voice tightened to a shout, "The dynamite's ready to go off! Look out!"

Don Fajardo cried a curse and turned, and in that instant Señor Jack came forward like an arrow. His big body crashed into Fajardo with a shock that brought a grunt from the Mexican. The gun exploded, fire flashing, not anywhere near Señor Jack. Fajardo reeled back, right towards the river, and in the instant before he lost footing to plunge into the wild *rio*, he screamed, "You 'ave tricked me!" Then he slipped into the water, screeched in mortal terror once, and was silenced. The *rio* crashed on, a furious rush of white water over rocks in which no man could live.

The cigar lay black against the earth close to the fuse, but not near enough to light it. Marza felt her breath rush out and it left her weak, too weak to stand. She didn't fall, for Jack leaped forward to hold her upright in his arms—in his strong arms, where she wanted to linger, always. His warm mouth came down against hers, kissing her again and again, while between kisses his voice whispered words that sent her pulses thundering.

"Kiss me, Marza. I ran out after I'd gotten the truth from Calico. I went to Fajardo's house and roused the servants. I was wild at him—maybe I figured to kill him, I don't know. Anyway, they said he wasn't home. Then I thought of the bridge, and my suspicions of him. Kiss me, Marza. I ran for the bridge, heard your scream when I was ony a hundred yards away. I'd never have found you until too late if you hadn't screamed. Fajardo was too intent upon you to hear me when I came down."

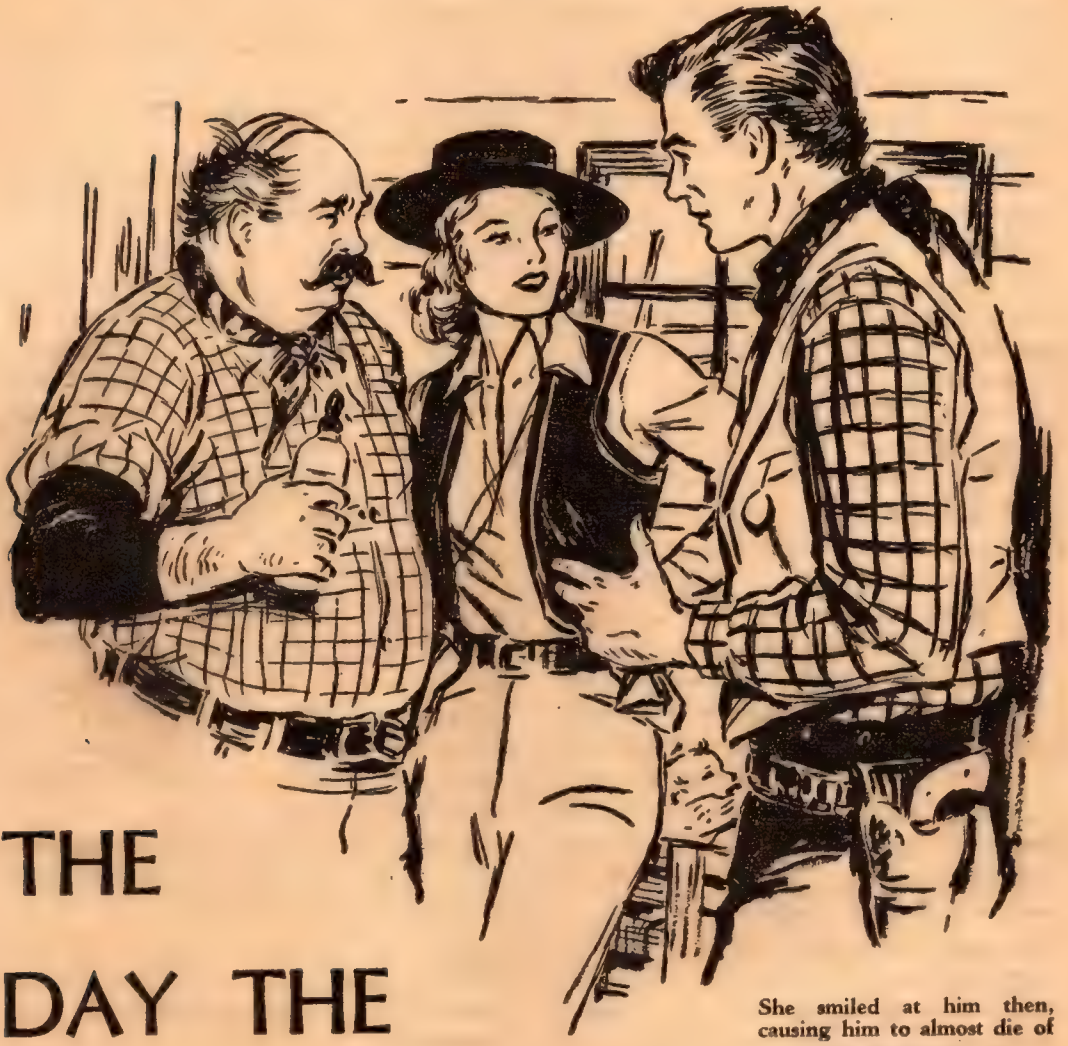
"I— oh, Señor Jack-ee—"

"Marza, will you marry me soon? I've something to offer you now. I can vindicate myself as a bridge builder. The other night, when Fajardo challenged me, I had nothing to offer you. Fajardo could give you everything — money, security — I couldn't give you a thing, so I had to back down. But this bridge will prove me right."

And he added, in words that made Marza's heart beat faster, "I love you, Marza. I love you more than anything! Marry me."

But of course she would marry him, and she would love him, forever. There in the wonderful world within his arms, she couldn't speak for the ecstatic tightness in her throat. But her lips said what she wanted Señor Jack-ee to know. ♥ ♥ ♥

Dippy and his boys had no way of knowing that an angel was on the way to the Bar-D, so they went on a-feudin' and a-cussin'.



She smiled at him then, causing him to almost die of heart failure.

THE DAY THE ANGEL CAME

By Ben Frank

THE day the angel arrived on Dippy Drew's Bar-D, the boys were in a nasty frame of mind. Of course, they didn't have any idea an angel was on the way, or maybe they'd have been somewhat less loud-mouthed. But the way it was, the noon meal finished, they came stamping and snorting out of the old ranch house, four of the orneriest looking hard-cases you ever laid eyes on.

He-haw Hepley, the foreman, led the way, A scrawny, leathery-faced jasper

with a crooked, red nose and buck teeth, he squared off and sent a stream of tobacco juice hissing halfway across the wide front yard.

"Them dad-burned Cherneys," he exclaimed bitterly, "are gettin' a mite too big for their britches!"

The Cherneys had taken over the Double-X on the north and had insisted on having their share of range and water. So far, there'd been no gun fighting or bloodletting between the two rival outfits, but there'd been considerable harsh and bitter words spoken.

"Ah, ha!" Pedro said, testing the blade of a huge jackknife on a ragged thumbnail. "Eff theese Cherneys keep on—"

"A knife ain't no suitable weapon to teach them skunks a thing or two!" Utah Ummel cut in furiously. "What they need is a rope over a strong tree limb an'—"

"I ain't no hand to hang a man," Corn-bread Curry murmured. He wore a somewhat grimy apron looped about his fat middle and held an iron gravy ladle in his right hand. Being the cook, as well as the oldest man on the ranch, he commanded a certain amount of respect from the others. "I say, shoot the buzzards! Ketch 'em out in the open someday an' open fire on—"

"Who're you going to open fire on?"

The grumbling cowhands turned to face Dippy Drew, young owner of the Bar-D, who'd just stepped out on the front porch.

"We was discussin' them Cherneys," old Corn-bread informed.

"Oh, them!" Dippy's bony, sunburned face darkened, and his blue eyes narrowed dangerously. He put a door-filling pair of shoulders against the wall and began to roll a cigarette with his huge, brown hands.

"I don't know what to do," he went on worriedly. "First time I ever had a run-in with a pack of coyotes that has women folks. Now, if it wasn't for Mrs. Cherney and that girl—what's her name—"

"You know blamed well what her name is," Corn-bread Curry said pointedly. "It's Eve; an' the last time you seen her in town, I thought your eyes was goin' to pop outa the sockets!"

"If it wasn't for them women," Dippy continued, blushing furiously, "I'd say, ride over to the Double-X and have a showdown. But—"

"Dang it all, Dippy," He-haw Hepley hollered, "why let two females stop us, even if one is a mighty purty."

"Boys," Utah Ummel interrupted, "looks like we got us a batch of company coming."

Thankful for this interruption, Dippy faced around. Heading toward the Bar-D ranch house at a dust-fogging clip came a buggy pulled by two sorrel ponies.

"Looks like the Hardrock livery barn outfit," he murmured.

"That's Wall-eye Wilson doin' the driving, all right," He-haw observed. "But I don't recognize the bearded gent holdin' that bundle in his arms."

"Appears to me he's dressed somewhat peculiar for a gent," Utah muttered.

"Ah, ha!" Pedro exclaimed. "Heems wearing fimmale clothes!"

"Dang it all, you're right!" He-haw exploded. "Why would a gent be wearing a dress an' a hat with flowers?"

THE BUGGY came to a halt, and the dust caught up with it, momentarily hiding it from view. When the dust cleared, Dippy found himself staring in disbelief at the bearded, bundle-bearing, dress-wearing person standing beside the buggy. It was a woman. There couldn't be no mistake about that.

"Gents," Wall-eye Wilson said pleasantly, "meet Miss Minerva, the bearded lady from Grant's Giant Circus."

The Bar-D crew stood frozen speechless, with their mouths hanging open.

"I came to see Mr. Jeff Drew," the bearded-lady said, "but Mr. Wilson tells me—"

At the mention of Dippy's old man's

name, the boys took off their hats and bowed their heads.

Dippy cleared his throat and managed to say, "Pa died three years ago, miss."

And now his eyes were fixed on the bundle in the bearded lady's arms. There was something alive in it. A pink-cheeked baby, who suddenly opened a pair of round, blue eyes and gazed curiously back at Dippy.

"Since your father's dead," the bearded lady said, stepping up close to the petrified Dippy, "this belongs to you."

Dippy was too dazed to do anything but take the baby in his long, awkward arms and hang on for dear life.

"It's like this," the bearded lady explained as she fished an envelope from a pocket, "your cousin, Milton Drew, was with Grant's Giant Circus. About a week ago, a tornado tore up the big tent, killing Milt's wife and injuring him fatally. He lived just long enough to tell us what to do with the baby and write this letter. Since my husband and I were their best friends, I promised to bring Angel here."

She held out the envelope.

Dippy remembered Cousin Milt only faintly. Years ago, Milt had come to the Bar-D to live, but being a restless kid, had run away with some two-bit circus that had visited Hardrock. He'd never written, so they'd never known whether he was alive or dead until now.

Having his arms full of baby, Dippy couldn't open the letter. "Here," he said, and handed the baby to old Corn-bread Curry.

Corn-bread liked to fainted. He looked like a man who'd felt in the dark for his boots and had come up with a rattlesnake. No telling what he would have done if the baby hadn't reached up, patted his whiskery cheek, and chuckled.

That did it. Old Corn-bread tightened his grip and looked downright proud. "Dang my hide!" he said hoarsely. "She likes me!"

But nobody was paying any mind to Corn-bread. Dippy had opened the envelope and had found a thin gold wedding ring, a birth certificate, a marriage certificate, and a short note.

He read the note aloud: "Dear Uncle Jeff, Since you are my closest living relative, I am sending my baby to you. She is seven months old and her name is Angel. I know you will be good to her. Milt."

The bearded lady reached into the buggy and lifted out a small, battered suitcase. "Some extra clothes and bottles for Angel," she said. "A few things Milt thought Angel might want when she grows up, like pictures of him and his wife.

"Now, I've got to be going, or I'll miss my train. Good-bye, Angel, honey."

She climbed back into the buggy. Walleye shook out the lines, and they departed in a swirl of dust.

The Bar-D crew just stood there, staring pop-eyed, until the buggy had disappeared over a rolling hill. Then He-haw Hepley began to swear fervently.

"Shut up, yuh danged ole heathen!" Corn-bread yelled. "You can't talk like that when there's a lady present!"

He-haw swallowed half his cud and turned a brick red. Utah started to laugh, took one look at the sudden deadly glint in He-haw's eyes, and changed the laugh into a faint cough. Pedro closed the long blade of his jackknife and eased over to have a closer look at Angel.

"Nize babe," he said. "Goo, goo!"

Angel laughed happily and reached for his long, black mustache. Pedro lifted a defensive hand, and she held onto the jackknife. For a moment, there followed a tug of war, but Angel easily came out winner.

Pedro's hawk-nosed face cracked into what was supposed to be a smile. The jackknife was his most valued possession, but he said, "Ah, ha, I geeve eet to you, leetle babe."

"Now, looky," Utah bristled, a throat-slittin' knife ain't no suitable toy for a girl

baby to have. Take it away from her!"

PEDRO ROLLED his brown hands into fists and took a step toward Utah. "Eef heem wants my knife, I sayed she can have my knife."

"Easy, boys," Dippy said, stepping in between them. He didn't want anybody getting maimed or killed in a hand to hand fight. These boys had been working on the Bar-D for a long time, and since his pa had died and left things to him, he felt kind of responsible for what happened. "I don't aim to have no fights in front of a lady, either!" he added.

Now, this Dippy Drew was a big, young man of twenty-four, who could lick his weight in wildcats if he got mad enough. And right at the moment, he looked plenty riled. So Pedro and Utah gave up the idea of a battle and again turned their attention to Angel.

The fight having been averted, Dippy ran a bony hand through his uncombed, sun-bleached hair and shook his head in bewilderment. "How," he asked, "do you raise a baby? Especially a girl baby?"

Four pairs of startled eyes turned on him. Not one of the boys had given a moment's thought to the complicated problems offered by a seven-months-old baby girl.

Following a long, uneasy silence, Corn-bread murmured hopefully, "Why, it ought to be easy. Just let 'em grow. Just like a calf or a colt. Just—"

"Yeah," Utah cut in, "but a calf or a colt has got his mamma to feed him. Angel here ain't got no—"

"We," Pedro said wisely, "iss got to git us a fimmale to look after her."

At that moment, Angel screwed up her face and began to howl.

"What'd you do to her, Corn-bread?" He-haw yelled angrily. "Pinch her, or somethin'?"

"Didn't do nothin'," Corn-bread declared. "She just started on her own accord. Didn't pinch her, or anything."

"Maybe she needs burpin'," Utah suggested. "I read some'ers—"

"What's burpin'?" He-haw demanded.

When it came to a showdown, Utah didn't exactly know. Nobody else knew, either; and all the time, Angel was kicking and yelling bloody murder.

Corn-bread's fat, whiskery face had turned pale. "We got to have help," he wheezed. "First thing we know, she'll choke to death, or bust a hame-string!"

Well, it didn't take fifteen seconds for them to agree on the one and only possible course of action. Somebody had to go to get Mrs. Cherney and bring her to the Bar-D, pronto. Like He-haw said, Mrs. Cherney had five babies of her own, and even if them four Cherney boys was as low-down a passel of skunks as ever drew breath, Ma Cherney sure ought to know what to do for Angel. But, agreeing on who ought to risk his life riding up to the Cherney home in broad daylight was a horse of a different color. All the time they discussed the matter, Angel kicked and squalled and beat the air with her tiny fists.

At last, the hands faced Dippy with cold-eyed stares.

"It's like this," He-haw said, "when you get down to brass tacks, she's your baby, Dippy, so it's up to you to go get Mrs. Cherney!"

They took a vote. It was four to one in favor of Dippy's riding to the Double-X.

"They won't likely shoot an unarmed man," Utah said.

"Better take a white flag, too," Corn-bread advised. "And so's they'll believe you, take along them marriage and birth certificates to show 'em."

TWO MINUTES later, face pale, but grim with determination, Dippy was on his way. He had a good horse and went across the rolling hills like a streak. Coming in sight of the Double-X ranch house,

he pulled a square of bed-sheet from a pocket and waved it above his head. Nothing happened, and suddenly he was scared to death that nobody was home. He hit the ground and raced to the door. Panting, he began to pound with both fists.

The door opened a crack, and he caught a glimpse of a white face before it shut with a bang. He heard the lock grate.

"Get out," a frightened, female voice said, "or I'll shoot through the door!"

Dippy bravely stood his ground and explained the purpose of his visit.

"I don't believe you!" It sounded like a girl's voice. "You Bar-D boys are a bunch of no-good horsethieves, and this is some trick."

Not knowing what else to do, Dippy shoved the birth and marriage certificates under the door. For a long minute, nothing happened. Then the door swung slowly open.

Eve Cherney stood there, a medium-tall girl in a gingham dress, with a sixgun in one hand and the papers in the other.

"All right," she said. "Maybe you are telling the truth."

Dippy had seen her at a distance, but never before had he been close enough to see how pretty she was. She had soft grayish-blue eyes and light-brown hair flecked with golden lights and a few golden-brown freckles scattered over her nose.

"My mother and father have gone to spend the week with my Uncle Fred in Tabor County," she said. "So—"

Dippy suddenly felt that all was lost. "What'll we do?" he wailed. "We wanted your ma to come over and—"

"I'll go," she said.

"You?" He stared at her in amazement. Man, she was pretty—soft red mouth, a twinkle in her eyes, even if she did have the sixgun pointed at him.

"Helped take care of my two younger brothers," she said. "Guess I can take care of a baby girl. Go saddle a horse for me."

By the time he came back with a saddled horse, she had changed into a white blouse and a dark riding skirt. She had the sixgun belted about her slender waist and carried a small bundle in her left hand.

"What you got there?" he asked curiously.

"Baby powder," she said, "some mild soap, and some other things that a bunch of rattlesnakes wouldn't have around their place." Then she pointed a steady finger at him. "I've left a note for my brothers, telling them where I've gone. If this is some kind of a trick and anything happens to me, they'll come over and take your outfit apart!"

With that, she swung into the saddle and headed across country. She could ride, and Dippy had picked a good horse for her. It wasn't long until they were clattering across the Bar-D yard and straight up to the front door.

Here they were met by four solemn-faced men who looked like they'd just lost all their money. He-haw took off his battered hat, and the other hands followed suit.

"I reckon it's about over," he said brokenly. "Angel passed out on us. She's still breathin', but mighty fast and shallow."

The girl took one look at the four wind-burned, hard-bitten cowhands and drew her gun. They looked plumb dangerous, yet she thought she detected a tear in He-haw's right eye. She shoved past them and eased into the house, expecting almost anything to happen. Then she saw the baby and forgot her suspicions. Corn-bread had improvised a crib for Angel out of an old orange crate and stuffed it with a couple of horse blankets.

Eve slid the gun back into the holster and chuckled. "There's nothing wrong with her," she said. "Probably gave up trying to tell you idiots what was wrong and went to sleep."

At the sound of Eve's voice, Angel opened her eyes and smiled. Then she began to wail fretfully.

"Don't worry, honey," Eve said. "Everything's going to be all right." Then she turned on the Bar-D outfit and said furiously, "She can't stay here in a place like this. I'm going to take her home where she can be cared for properly, and—"

"Just a minute, lady," He-haw cut in coldly. "This happens to be our baby, and we aim to take care of her ourselves and keep her here where we can keep a eye on her. You just tell us what to do to raise her, an' we'll do it."

"Yes, siree!" Corn-bread said grimly. "We ain't goin' to have Angel grow up around no wide-loopers like you Cherneys!"

Eves' eyes took a deadly glitter, and Corn-bread said no more. She turned to Dippy for help, but he slowly shook his head. "I reckon we'll keep Angel here," he said flatly.

For a minute, Eve had a notion to walk out on them. But she couldn't, not with Angel whimpering to be fed and taken care of. So squaring her shoulders, Eve began to give orders right and left.

"First, I want plenty of warm water and a tub," she snapped. "Angel's got to have a bath. Boil those bottles," she said to Corn-bread. "We've got to have some fresh milk," she said to all of them. "One of you nit-wits go milk a cow."

At the mention of milking a cow, they stared back at her in horror.

"You going to let her starve to death?" Eve demanded.

Face pale, Utah slunk out the door to go run down a cow and extract some fresh milk.

EVE OPENED her bundle and explained about diapers, safety pins, powder, and baby oil. By then, the water had been heated and Utah had returned with a small pail of milk. Eve demonstrated the proper way to bathe a baby, while Angel splashed and cooed and had the time of her life. The men all looked bewildered.

After the baby had been fed and was once again asleep, Eve made an inspection of Corn-bread's kitchen.

"Filthy!" she said, rolling up her sleeves and digging into things. "Simply filthy!"

"Now, looky here," Corn-bread sputtered. "Ain't no Cherney nor nobody can come here and tell me that—"

"You can't raise a baby in a hog pen," Eve yelled back at him. "Get hold of that mop and get busy!"

Scared half out of his wits, Corn-bread got busy with the mop.

After the kitchen had been cleaned, Eve took paper and pencil and wrote out carefully instructions for the feeding and care of Angel. She was a pretty smart cooky, Eve Cherney was, even if she wasn't quite twenty. She could tell by the blank expressions on the Bar-D boys' faces that they wouldn't remember half of what she'd told them unless she wrote it down. She even had some doubts that they could read writing, so she printed the most important instructions.

Before she left, she lined them up against the wall and shook a slim, but meaningful, finger at them. "I'll be back in a day or so to check up on you," she said grimly. "If I find the kitchen in a mess, or if Angel isn't sweet and clean and happy like a baby should be, I'm taking her back home with me! Understand?"

Everyone was too scared to say yes or no; and before Dippy could find his voice to thank her for helping them, she'd swished out the door, leaped aboard her horse, and was galloping away.

"Ah, ha!" Pedro said darkly. "Theese Señorita Eve iss one fimmale hellcat!"

He-haw wiped a shaking hand over his clammy brow and swore fiercely. "You said it, Pedro. She's a—"

"Watch your language," Corn-bread warned, "or I'll—"

"She's asleep, ain't she?" He-haw howled.

"That don't make no difference," Utah snarled, siding in with the cook. "From now on, we're goin' to have respectable talk hereabouts, or no talk a-tall! Ain't that so, Dippy?"

Dippy agreed it was so. He glanced worriedly at the sleeping infant. Life had sure taken on a complicated turn. Too bad, he thought, a girl like Eve had to belong to a low-down tribe of polecats like the Cherneys.

As for Eve, she got back home ahead of her brothers and tore up the note she'd left. Knowing of the bad blood between her brothers and Dippy's boys, she decided to keep her visit to the Bar-D a secret until her pa and ma returned home. Pa Cherney didn't fly off the handle as easily as her brothers did, and Ma Cherney was a steadying influence. Eve didn't want any fighting between her family and Dippy—and thinking of Dippy, she felt kind of fluttery inside. He'd seemed right nice, in spite of what her brothers had said about him. And Angel, she was a darling!

Three days later, Eve slipped away from the Double-X and paid a second visit to the Bar-D. She found things in pretty good shape, considering the kind of scoundrels that inhabited the big, old house. Angel seemed fairly clean and decidedly healthy and happy. She lay in her orange-crate crib, contentedly cutting a tooth on the barrel of Utah's sixgun.

Utah was really provoked when Eve swapped a rubber teething ring for the gun. Eve also found a two-day-old bull calf bedded down in Angel's room.

"That calf," Dippy explained, "is a thoroughbred Hereford, with a pedigree longer'n your arm. We figured on turnin' him over to Angel for the beginning of her herd, so—"

Eve told him gently that it might be better to keep the calf in a corral, at least until Angel was a little older.

Sighing, Dippy muttered, "Take him outside, Pedro."

Pedro obeyed, but he didn't like it any way he looked at it. "Theese fimmale," he said darkly to He-haw, "iss a nose-steeker-in I would like to poosh in the reever!"

Before she headed for home, Eve cornered Dippy and Corn-bread Curry and gave them some parting instructions.

"Be careful with those safety pins," she warned. "And don't be stingy with the powder and the baby oil."

"Yes'm," Dippy said, thinking he could not remember ever having seen a girl half as pretty as Eve was when she smiled at Angel. Vaguely, he wished she'd smile at him. "You'll come again, sometime?" he asked hopefully.

SHE SMILED at him then, causing him to almost die of heart failure. Then she kissed Angel good-bye, went out to her horse, and rode away.

Dippy was all right, she thought as she rode homeward, and now that she was getting used to the rest of the Bar-D hands, they didn't seem half as low-down ornery as her brothers claimed they were. Even Pedro with his furious black mustache and the wicked-looking knife didn't worry her anymore.

The moment she came in sight of her home, she knew she was in for it. Lew, her oldest brother, and Boots, the second oldest, were squatted in the shade of a cottonwood, waiting for her.

Lew was a big-boned, hard-fisted man in his late twenties. He scowled and asked, "Where you been, sis?"

She wasn't the kind to lie to anybody, so she told him. Both brothers hit the ceiling.

"You wait till pa hears about you associatin' with that bunch of range-hogs!" Lew yelled.

"Yeah, you just wait!" Boots said grimly.

But her brothers didn't exactly scare her none. "Dippy's a nice boy," she said. "Just as nice as you two. And I don't believe they've stolen any of our cattle, or—"

Lew and Boots raved and ranted and said she'd lost her mind.

"Just got through driving a bunch of their cows off our grass," Lew yelled. "I tell you, that Bar-D outfit is crooked from the ground up! You've made your last visit there, baby or no baby!"

She laughed at them and tossed her head. But she knew she couldn't out-talk them. "All right," she said. "Pa left you in charge of things, and I'll stay away if you say so. But when the folks get home, we'll see what they say."

Smiling, holding her head erect, she went on to the house.

A few days later, the Bar-D hands held a long cornfab in the privacy of the horse barn. There was no two ways about it, they decided, Angel needed a mother. That evening, they cornered Dippy in the old ranch house and laid the law down in no uncertain terms.

Now, there hadn't been a woman living on the Bar-D since Dippy could remember. But he had to admit that likely they were right about Angel needing a woman to look after her.

"I'll go to Hardrock first thing in the mornin'," he promised, "and put an ad in the paper for a housekeeper."

He-haw Hepley took a fresh chew of tobacco and moved out on the edge of his chair.

"You kind of misunderstood, son," he said patiently. "What we mean is, Angel needs a *mother*, not a *housekeeper*. Now, there ain't no question about it, by law she's yours. That makes you her pa in kind of a left-handed way. Ain't that so?"

Dippy had to agree that it was so. In fact, he'd already got a lawyer in Hardrock to start court action for legal adoption of his cousin's child.

"So," He-haw went on, "the only way to give Angel a honest-to-gosh mother is for you to get married!"

Dippy leaped to his feet like somebody had prodded him with a hot branding iron. Marriage was something he'd always classed along with a broken leg or the toothache.

"Not me," he said hoarsely. "You can't make me—"

He took one look at the four grim faces in the room and felt a chill move along his spine. He'd known these hombres a long time and considered them his friends. But he also knew there could always come a time when friendship ceased.

"There ain't no girl who would marry me," he said hopefully.

"We talked that over, too," He-haw said, "an' we reckon that the four of us can scare up a wife for you."

Corn-bread cleared his throat for attention. "I still think this Eve Cherney would make a good—" His voice died in his throat, for the looks he got from everybody, including Dippy, were enough to make a man's blood run cold.

"Friend Corn-bready," Pedro said through the death like silence, "we don't got no use for a fimmale Cherney on the Bar-D!"

He-haw spat through the doorway into the night and went on as if Corn-bread hadn't mentioned Eve. It seemed that he himself knew a young widow with three children who might make Angel a suitable mother. However, Utah Ummel had not taken kindly to the idea of the three children and had suggested a girl he'd met one time back in Utah in a dance hall. Corn-bread Curry hadn't been much in favor of a dance hall girl, and since nobody was in favor of Eve, had suggested they find a school teacher who was looking for a husband. Corn-bread figured a school ma'am could give Angel the proper bringing up if anybody could. They had been unable to settle on any one of the three suggestions.

"So," He-haw concluded, "we're goin' to bring all three of these females to Hardrock, Dippy. This'll give you a choice amongst three ladies. What more can a man ask?"

DIPPY DIDN'T have no fit answer to that, so didn't say anything.

That night, he didn't sleep much. He dreamed there were three women chasing him, and they looked something like old Corn-bread, He-haw, and Utah rolled up into one. He was sure glad to see the sun come up the next morning.

On the Double-X, things were not too cheerful. Pa and Ma Cherney had returned home and had learned of their daughter's visits to the Bar-D.

Mrs. Cherney, who was a motherly soul, said, "That was right nice of you to help with the baby, Eve honey, but it was mighty risky. Everybody knows what a wild outfit they are."

"How could they be as bad as people say they are when any one of them would cut off his right arm for Angel?" Eve wailed.

"Does seem kind of odd," Ma Cherney admitted.

Pa Cherney didn't know what to say. He was mighty fond of Eve and usually gave in to her. But now he snorted and paced the floor and said if the double-dealing Bar-D sons made a false move, he would shoot their mangy hides full of holes. Yet he felt sorry for a tiny baby with no mother at all to look after it. Finally, he consented to let Eve visit Angel again, but—

Pa Cherney didn't know what so say. hid where they can keep a eye on the house," he said. "Then if you need help, all you'll have to do is yell."

Eve didn't like that. She said she wouldn't need any help for anything. But her old man's word was law on the Double-X, and it was either let her brothers go along, or stay home. So she let them go along.

Likely, everything would have worked out fine on this visit, if Utah hadn't accidentally stumbled on Lou's and Boots' horses where they'd been hidden in a brush-choked gully. Utah hurried back to where He-haw and Pedro were fixing fence and told them what he had discovered. The three returned stealthily to the ranch to learn what was going on. They found Lew and Boots in the horse barn, watching the house through a couple of knotholes. Naturally the Bar-D boys figured there was dirty work afoot and squared off for battle.

"What's a-goin' on here?" He-haw yelled.

Taken by surprise, Lew and Boots figured there was nothing to do but shoot their way out. So, leaping behind a pile of baled hay, they opened fire. The Bar-D boys took shelter behind the manger and returned the fire.

In the house, Eve and Dippy were discussing Angel's high intelligence. "Just yesterday," Dippy said proudly, "I heard her say—"

At that moment, the shooting began.

Eve was no fool. Nobody had to draw a picture to tell her what had happened. Face white, she lifted a double-barrel shotgun from wall pegs and raced for the barn. Dippy didn't know what was going on, but he raced after her.

She beat him to the barn and ran inside. He heard the shotgun blast. He stumbled through the doorway, and there she stood in the driveway between the baled hay and the manger, the shotgun ready for business, her eyes blazing. Of course, the boys had stopped shooting at each other, and in their astonishment at seeing her, had stepped out into the open.

Eve's slim fingers tightened on the shotgun. "Drop your irons!" she shouted at the Bar-D boys.

They dropped their guns like they'd suddenly turned red hot.

Eve turned on her brothers. "Get your horses and head for home!"

Lew and Boots slunk through the back door like a couple of kids caught stealing watermelons.

Eve just stood there, her breath coming fast, the shotgun held steadily in her small hands. She didn't say anything. She

just waited until she was sure her brothers were safely out of range, then she handed the shotgun to Dippy.

"Well," she said in a hollow voice, "that's that."

She looked up at him. She looked at him intently, for she reckoned she'd never have a chance to look at him this close again. This fight had turned the trick for good. Her pa would never let her come near the Bar-D again, or have anything to do with Dippy, that was for sure.

"Good-bye, Dippy," she said, trying not to cry, "and take good care of Angel."

WITH THAT, she turned and ran to her horse, leaped into the saddle, and rode away like a house on fire.

As for Dippy, he stood there in a state of terrible shock. The way she'd looked at him—man alive, no girl had ever looked at him like that, with her heart in her eyes!

"Get your hosses, boys," He-haw bellowed, "an' we'll run down them varmints an' finish 'em off."

That brought Dippy back to earth. He turned and glared at his men. "You idiots ain't goin' to run nobody down!" he said flatly.

With that, he left the barn and headed for the house, looking like a man who'd been hit over the head with a brick. He stumbled into the front room and hung up the shotgun. Angel had gone to sleep with her thumb in her mouth. He removed the thumb gently. Looking up, he saw Corn-bread Curry standing in the kitchen doorway.

"I reckon Eve's made her last visit to see Angel," Dippy said mournfully. "Poor Angel, I bet she'll miss her something terrible!"

But the way it turned out, Angel got along fine without Eve's visits. It was Dippy who was never the same again. He went around, tripping over his own feet, doing things backwards in an absent-minded way. Nothing seemed to cheer him up. Not even the news that the three prospects for a wife had been contacted and seemed agreeable to come to Hardrock, provided all expenses would be paid.

"I won't do it!" Dippy declared one rainy afternoon. "I won't marry no school ma'am, or no girl from Utah, or no widow with three kids!"

"Whatta you want to do?" He-haw yelled back at him. "Let Angel grow up with no mother love, nor nothin'?"

"All right, all right!" Dippy bellowed. "Bring on them three critters and I'll—"

"Sh!" Corn-bread cautioned. "You want to wake Angel up in the middle of her nap?"

Dippy was too aggravated to sit still. He went outdoors and stood in the rain until he'd cooled down some.

There was no telling what would have happened if Angel hadn't let out an angry squawk about midnight that night. In half a minute, all the Bar-D boys were in her room, staring down at her out of terrified eyes. Ordinarily she slept the nights through, so to have her cut loose like this was enough to scare them out of their wits.

She had a strong pair of lungs, Angel had, and she was mad from A to Z about something. She kicked and waved her arms and opened her mouth and let go for all she was worth.

The boys tried everything they could think of to make her happy. Utah offered her his sixgun and Pedro gave her his knife, but she yelled all the louder.

Then He-haw accused Corn-bread of not following Eve's feeding instructions, and Corn-bread threatened to go get his gun and shoot it out with He-haw. Utah and Pedro took opposite sides, and for a minute, it looked like anything might happen. But actually the boys were too worried about Angel to get down to any serious fighting.

"Somethin's got to be did," He-haw said, " 'fore she busts a lung."

Suddenly, as if the same thought had come to all at the same time, they turned on poor Dippy.

"You, son," Corn-bread said, "have got to go for Eve Cherney!"

"And get myself murdered!" Dippy yelled.

They began to close in on him, and it occurred to him that he might as well be murdered as to be torn limb from limb. So he agreed to go after Eve. He saddled his horse and galloped away.

When he arrived, the Double-X ranch was dark. Dippy slid to the ground and ran to the front door. Old man Cherney answered his frantic knock. He had a lantern in his hand. He took one look at Dippy and let out a yell that brought his sons on the run in their shirt tails.

Recognizing Dippy, Lew roared, "Get a rope, an' we'll hang the critter!"

"First," Boots grated, "I'm goin' to knock him—"

"Hold your hosses, boys," the old man said, "and give the dad-burned sidewinder a chance to speak his piece."

"It's Angel," Dippy said hoarsely, almost in tears.

"Angel?" Eve stood in a doorway, her gray-blue eyes wide and frightened. "Did you say something's wrong with Angel?"

"Yeah," Dippy said. "She's crying something awful!"

"Wait till I get my coat," Eve said, "and I'll go—"

Well, the Cherneys held a pow-wow. Some were for letting Eve go, and others weren't.

"It's a trick of some kind!" Lew ranted. "Get a rope, Boots, an' we'll hang this feller right now."

"Shut up!" Pa Cherney bellowed. "If they got a sick baby, all right. But if they're just foolin', somebody's going to pay. Come on, Lew, help me get some hosses saddled."

IN A FEW minutes, they were on their way to the Bar-D—Dippy, Eve, Lew, and old man Cherney—riding like the wind. The old man had left Boots, Ma Cherney, and the two younger kids at home to guard the place, just in case the Bar-D outfit was up to some underhanded trick.

Angel was still kicking and squawking when they arrived.

"Poor little kid," Eve said, picking her

TWO QUEENS FOR A GAMBLER

By CLARK GRAY

Never before in her sheltered life had beautiful, blonde Meg known anyone like dashing John Hale—the tinhorn who made her heart want to gamble on love.

Plus a fiction bonanza of romantic Western tales featuring McKay Henry and other top-notch authors in the great March issue!

RANGELAND ROMANCES

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up, "with nobody to look after you but a houseful of savages."

"Now, looky here," He-haw bristled, "that ain't no way for a lady to talk about—"

"How careless can you men get?" Eve said furiously. "Someone forgot to close a safety pin. If I ever find out who did that, I'll break his neck!"

"Me, too!" Utah roared. "Who in tarnation—"

"I," Pedro said darkly, "will cut hees ears off!"

"Horse-whippin' what a gent needs who'd let a safety pin stick a purty baby like her!" old man Cherney declared. "Just point out the son who forgot to shut that safety—"

Eve could see that things were getting out of hand and if she didn't do something quick, likely they'd start tearing down the house.

"Sometimes pins do come open themselves," she said calmly. "I see this pin's bent, so no doubt—anyway, it really didn't hurt Angel much, just enough to wake her up and make her angry."

Everybody relaxed and grinned a little sheepishly at each other.

"Got some hot coffee and doughnuts," Corn-bread Curry piped up fom the kitchen doorway. "About breakfast time, anyhow, so come an' get it."

Every one, except Eve, went into the kitchen and set to work on the doughnuts and coffee.

"You know somethin'," Cherney said, "these are mighty good doughnuts. How about another cup of coffee, Corn-bread. It's mighty good, too."

Corn-bread filled the cup and shoved the sugar across the table. A certain air of friendliness filled the room.

"You boys don't seem like the bunch of skunks I thought you was," old Cherney said, grinning. "Maybe we could kind of work friendly-like together on this grass and water business?"

"Why, sure," Dippy agreed.

They shook hands, and suddenly everybody was laughing and slapping one another on the back.

"You boys drop around to the Double-X for Sunday dinner," Cherney invited. "Be sure to bring Angel. I figure my wife'll want to make up a batch of clothes for that kid. Come on, Lew, we better head for home."

"Ain't you forgot something?" Dippy asked. "Eve's in there with Angel, and she might be wantin' to go."

"Figure you can see she gets home safe when she's ready to come," Cherney said and walked out into the darkness with Lew tagging close behind.

In a few minutes, Eve said she was ready to go home. She stood in the doorway, smiling. "I heard what pa said about Sunday dinner," she said. "I'll bake a big chocolate cake."

He-haw Hepley stood in the doorway and watched her and Dippy ride away into the starlight. He bit off a big chew, shook his head, swore softly, then looked into space and sighed.

"Guess we might as well write them three women there ain't nobody around the Bar-D who wants one of 'em for a wife," he said to Utah.

"What do you think, Corn-bread?" Utah asked uncertainly. He didn't want the weight of the decision on him.

"Why, He-haw's right," Corn-bread said. "Besides, I figure we could take the money it would cost to bring them women here and buy some mighty fancy wedding presents for Eva an'—"

He let it go at that, and went back into the kitchen to wash the coffee cups. In a way, he felt kind of low-down mean about opening that safety pin, but he'd been mighty careful to make sure it was well padded and wouldn't stick too deep into Angel's tender skin. Anyway, the way things had worked out, he guessed maybe she'd forgive him some day. ♥ ♥ ♥

MARRYIN' FEVER

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

He kissed her quickly and desperately, but just long enough to set his heart thumping.

What could the dimpled cowboy do, when the nester gal made herself at home on his land—and then put a fence around his heart?

FRANK DAWSON was standing close to the tin shaving mirror he'd nailed to the trunk of a tree, and was scraping whiskers from his dimpled chin, when the stampede hit his camp. The first thing he heard was the sound of fast-driven cattle, next a female voice shouted something like a war-whoop, and then there was the bang of a shot.

He looked around and saw that the cattle streaming down the canyon wore his brand-new Leaning D brand.

A girl rode behind them, her brown hair streaming back, an old shooting iron lifted high in her hand. She closed her eyes and fired another shot into the air.

Frank didn't wait around to get trampled. He made a high jump and grabbed a limb of the nearest cottonwood tree and pulled himself up. The cattle went sailing through the camp, upsetting the stove and the wash bench, and parting and couple of stake ropes so that his tent sagged over to one side.

The cattle continued on around the bend of the canyon and a sudden silence hit the camp. The girl pulled rein and looked up at Frank. "I saw a monkey, one time," she said. "You do resemble him, Mister Fence-cutter!"

Frank wiped soapy lather from his jaw and glared down at her. She was about twenty. Her cheeks were rosy with excitement, and her big, blue eyes seemed happy about the way she had treed him. She probably weighed only a hundred pounds, but these pounds were distributed most fetchingly. Her wash-faded levis were tight on tapering thighs, and her shirt was left three buttons open against the heat of the morning. There was a sprinkling of freckles on her nose and her lips looked kissing sweet. *Too bad,* Frank thought, *she has to be so ornery.*

He let his six-foot length down from the tree and looked around at the ruin of his camp. "Name's Dawson," he reminded her. "What I ought to do is paddle you good."

"Try that once," she invited. "I'm a first-rate shin-kicker."

He took a step toward her, but she flipped her leg over to the far side of her horse, which she rode bareback, and gestured with the gun. "On second thought, you'd better keep back. It would be a shame if all those pretty girls down in Warbonnet went into mourning because you got that dimple scratched right out of your chin. I'm a good scratcher, too." She pointed down the canyon and said. "From now on, you keep those cows of yours down below here. That waterhole up above my place must have gone dry because they broke down my fence last night and made themselves at home at the spring and in my garden."

This was the fault of her own stubbornness and nobody else's, Frank was thinking. She had no business moving into the old stage station and fencing off the spring which was Frank's only sure source of water at this end of his range. She was using that water to irrigate the vegetable garden she raised for the cafe down in Warbonnet.

Frank had tangled with her two months back, after she had plunked her shapely self down on his land. Returned from a hunting trip, he heard his cows bawling around the spring one morning and had gone up there to see what was the matter. What he found was a new three-wire fence keeping the cattle out of the garden and away from the water. A pair of pliers fixed that. But when Judy Pace drove in from town with her buckboard, and caught him putting up a big sign that said, "NO NESTERS WANTED—GET OUT," the remarks she made had been sharper than the barbs on the wire.

Though the station and spring were on land that had been deeded to Frank by old Roarin' Ed Barlock, the filly claimed she owned them and mentioned an uncle of hers who had operated the station when the stage line ran through Apache Pass. She said she intended to let Frank have some of the water for his stock when the dry months came, but now she wouldn't. Then she picked up an old pistol from the buckboard seat and waved it in his face as she told him to keep his critters away from her property.

He hadn't worked very hard at that—he could be stubborn too.

There still had been some water in the hole farther up the pass, so he just shoved his cattle up that way, knowing it wouldn't last. The best range he had was in Stage Road Canyon, and if he was to get a good

calf crop, he needed to keep them on good graze.

Now he said, "If you don't know better'n chase cattle like you just done, I ought to learn you by suin' you for the beef you run off 'em."

"Hop right to it. I can hire me a lawyer too, and sue for the cabbages they ate. The trouble with you cowboys is that when you get a two-bit herd and a dab of ground, you think you own the earth. And just because your dimple's got all the girls in Warbonnet twittering you think you—"

A new voice remarked, "Grab her off'n that horse, cowboy, an' kiss her proper—only way there is to shut up a sassy woman."

JUDY PACE gasped and looked around. Frank looked too, and saw that old Roarin' Ed was sitting on his horse a few yards away. From the sparkle in the oldster's eyes, it seemed he had the mistaken notion that these were romantic goings-on, and he'd come up quietly so he wouldn't disturb them.

The girl cried, "What do you know about women, you old lizard? You never were married."

Old Ed chuckled. He was little and so dried-up that it seemed a good wind might blow him out of his saddle, but he could make a great deal of noise when he took the notion. He said, "I'm an observin' man. One thing I've learned is that when a filly starts makin' a nuisance of herself with some young buck, generally she's got her loop set for 'im."

Judy sniffed, but her cheeks got red. "Well, this is one time when she generally hasn't, Mr. Barlock. This is strictly business! You got this dimpled Romeo into a mess by giving him land that wasn't yours to give. Now let's see you get him out of it!"

She swung her horse around and rode from Frank's camp. Dawson opened his mouth to holler that he'd be up directly to fix that fence, but then thought better of it. The water was his rightfully and he needed it for his cows.

Roarin' Ed watched her go. "Mighty purty filly," he observed. "Spunky an' sassy—make a good wife for a hombre like you."

Frank snorthed and picked up his razor from where it had fallen. He tested the edge and found a couple of nicks in it. He asked, "You positive she hadn't got any claim to that spring, Ed?"

"None whatever. I bought this whole range of mount'ns from the government back when I was a heap younger, an' thought I needed room. That uncle of hers never did try to make claim to the part where the stage station's at. Just abandoned it an' moved away when the coaches stopped runnin'. That was before I bought in. No, she's just tryin' to put somethin' over on you. Marryin' her'd be a right neat way for you to—"

"Whoa!" Frank said grimly. "I like the cuddly kind, like Olga Johansson down in Warbonnet. One that's got claws an' a six-gun ain't my style."

Old Ed sighed. He'd built the Rafter B spread which occupied the whole big country north of Warbonnet Basin, but now he was crowding seventy-five and had no one to leave it to. He had a heart as big as a haystack, but it brimmed with romantic notions. Let one of his cowpokes—which Frank had been—mention he'd like to get a start on his own, and he'd find himself settled on a few hundred acres of land, with a starter herd and every pretty girl in Warbonnet informed that he was a marryin' prospect.

Ed had decided that he'd missed out on something in life and was hellbent to see that his punchers didn't make the same mistake. A man he set up as a rancher didn't get a house right away, though. That was withheld till he got himself a wife and then it was built as a wedding present.

Old Ed was saying, "I was over to Ray

Immler's place today. That little wife he's got can sure dish up a meal. Seen their new baby too—lively little feller, like to pulled my ear off. There ain't any reason why you should stay denned up here under canvas."

Frank shook his head, well aware that the old coot was getting around to that marryin' business again. "Before I go fily-huntin', I aim to get a calf crop an' some money in the bank. To do that, it looks like I got to get rid of that nuisance at the spring."

"It'll cost you some doin'," old Ed predicted.

When Frank rode into town that afternoon, he was solemn as a new deacon. He tied his horse at the rack in front of the saloon, but he didn't go in. Two reasons for that; he was about broke now that old Ed's regular paychecks weren't coming his way, and he had important matters on his mind. He climbed the outside stairs to Ben Lincott's law office.

Lincott was about thirty, handsome and sideburned, with polished manners and an eye for a pretty gal—anybody's pretty gal.

A few times, he came near to getting run out of town, but he was the only lawyer in Warbonnet. He listened to Frank and then he leaned back in his swivel chair and stared at the ceiling.

"It would seem," he said, "that you have grounds for legal action. But there's no telling how those things will turn out when you put a pretty girl in front of a jury. And court costs can run pretty high."

"I'll get hold of the money, you start the fireworks. She's got no right up there an' I'm mad at her, seein' as how she ran my cattle through my camp this mornin' an' dang near wrecked it."

But Lincott shook his head. "Sorry, friend. It happens that Miss Pace has already retained me to represent her in this matter."

Frank cuffed his sweat-stained hat to the back of his head. "Well . . . ." he said.

He went back down the stairway, and he was in a mood to bite nails. He'd been feeling guilty about kicking Judy Pace off his land, but he didn't feel that way any more. If she had money enough to hire a handsome law-shark, she could afford to move her truck garden some place else.

He crossed the street to the cafe and spent a nickel for a cup of coffee. Olga Johansson, who had waited table ever since Judy chucked the job, put her elbows on the counter and smiled at him. Olga had taffy-colored hair, a buxom figure, and a wide, friendly smile. She looked at the scratches that the nicked razor had left on Frank's face when he finished his interrupted shave, and she inquired, "Wildcat trouble or girl?"

"Razor trouble."

"Oh," Olga said sweetly. "I thought maybe you'd gotten frisky with that snippy Judy Pace. She doesn't like cowboys a bit. How's she making out up there in the old stage station?"

"All right, I reckon."

"I'll just bet. It must be cozy, having a pretty girl so close to your camp. Too bad it has to be one with a disposition like Judy's got. Me, I wouldn't go scratching any handsome cowboy all up like that. They are too scarce around here."

"Like I told you," Frank began, "it was my razor."

"Oh, sure!" Olga smiled sweetly. She put the tip of her forefinger to his chin. She said, "Anyway, she didn't gouge out that dimple—I just love that."

Frank gulped the last of his coffee and got out of there, shaking his head to Olga's inquiry as to whether he was going to the dance that was coming up. He stalked along the street, thinking darkly about getting into a fight with somebody and getting that dimple flattened out. It wasn't really a dimple at all, it was a cleft. Yet it made him an oddity, or something—and oddities seemed to intrigue the gals.

He hadn't minded it a bit, back in the

days when he was an ordinary cowboy, a light-hearted hombre who pranced with all the gals. But now he was a rancher, with problems on his mind.

In front of the Mercantle, he ran into three more young females, all of them decked out in summery dresses—Dacy Strong, Trenna Conway, and Sarah Wilder. They were all smiles and giggles. They wanted to know how his ranch was coming along, and they agreed with each other that living in the mountains was making him a mighty rugged-looking hombre. They also asked if he was going to the dance Saturday night.

And they all asked him to come calling on them. Dacy offered to bake him a pie, Sarah claimed her raspberry cake would make him sit up and take notice, and Trenna said something about maple pudding. Old Ed Barlock had been making the rounds, all right. Frank was a marked man—and Judy Pace had him sewed up to where he couldn't think about marryin' till he got rid of her. . . .

HE GOT away from the gals, ducked around a corner, and hunted up the adobe house where Manuel Garcia lived with a fat wife and a batch of little, brown kids. Manuel was the well digger. He went through a rigmarole with omens and witching sticks before he went to digging, but he knew all about underground water.

Frank and Manuel squatted in the yard and scratched marks on the hard-packed earth with sticks. Frank said, "You know that spring up at the ol' stage station in the pass?"

Manuel nodded vigorously. "*Si.* Bes' spring een the *montañas.* Don' ever go dry een summer. You are lucky you got eet."

"That's the one. If a feller was to put down a well right near to it, what do you reckon would happen? The well might pull the water out of the spring an' it'd go dry, you think?"

Manuel shrugged. "*Quien sabe?* Have to use dynamite for dig the well. Maybe when eet shake the groun', anything happen. Maybe the spring ees come from undergroun' river, an' the whole thing come up an' make the big flood. Or maybe the whole thing dry up an' you not got water een well either. Why you wan' to monkey with eet?"

Manuel didn't know that Frank didn't exactly have that spring anymore. Frank shook his head doubtfully, thinking that this was like that court business—it got to be quite complicated. He said, "I'll have to do some thinkin' on it, Manuel."

He aimed to get that water. And, by the time he got back to his ranch, he'd figured out a way to do it.

He put the rest of the day to rounding up his cattle and driving them to the south end of his range, where there was a little spring that would probably dry up in a week or two. Might be it would last long enough for him to deal with Judy Pace, and with her fancy lawyer too, if the hombre tried to interfere. Having brought along a cake of salt, Frank got the cows settled on their new range and headed wearily back to camp.

Next morning, he went over to Ray Immler's place and borrowed a wagon, a team, and a post-hole digger, with several lengths of extension pipe. "Aimin' to do some fence buildin'," he explained.

Ray, who'd been a stringy-built, woeful-looking cowpoke when they both worked on the Rafter B, had plumped out considerably on his wife's cooking. He looked as sleek and contented as a bear in a berry patch. He said, "Ol' Ed was by here yesterday. Mentioned you had some she-tuff up there in the Pass with you. Makin' any headway?"

"She's got a grudge against cowboys," Frank said. "Me in particular."

"Tame her. Slip that ring on her finger an' she'll—"

"Hell," Frank said. "Has everybody around here got the marryin' fever?"

When he drove the wagon up the old stage road and halted in front of the way station, it was past noon. Judy was on the porch and at first she didn't seem to notice his arrival. She was wearing a full skirt and a white blouse, and was walking back and forth in a tantalizing way that made him gulp. Then she sat down in a chair, crosed her legs with cute knees showing, and turned her head to give him a dazzler of a smile.

The smile disappeared quickly. "Oh," she said, "hello, there. That smile wasn't for you. It was for the jury."

Frank finally wound the lines around the brake handle, after missing it completely the first two tries. "What in blue blazes," he demanded, "was you doin'?"

"Practicing." She gave him a smile that *was* intended for him—a mighty small one. "Ben—Mr. Lincott—was out here yesterday evening and told me that you were talking about starting a lawsuit against me. He said that my legal claim might be kind of shaky, but that when he got me in front of a jury we'd make out fine. He also said the case ought to bring him a lot of good publicity."

"He did, did he?" Frank jutted his jaw at her, dimple and all. "I'm givin' you one last chance to be reasonable." He nodded toward the spring, where her fence enclosed a garden with vegetables growing in neat, colored rows. "I'll fix a trough just outside that wire for my cows, an' run a pipe to it from the—"

"And have your cows keep breaking down my fence to get at the garden?" She shook her head. "Nope! I'm not dealing with you—not after the way you cut my fence and put up that nasty sign."

He choked some, wondering how a girl so pretty could be so ornery. He asked, "Why'd you come up here? You knowed mighty well you had no rights to this ground."

"I think I have," she said serenely. "My uncle built this place, and he found that water. There wasn't any here until he started digging a well and hit that spring instead. As to why I came up here, I was tired of working in town and slapping cowboys who want to kiss every girl they see."

Frank looked at the ground. The few times he'd been in the cafe when Judy was working there the counter had been lined two deep with hombres who ate there for the privilege of looking at her. Olga Johansson wouldn't have gotten ruffled by all that attention.

He said, "All right, I've given you your chance. Now I'm goin' to pry you out of here." He got down from the wagon and led the team along past her rickety three-wire fence. Stopping at a point a few yards up-canyon from the spring, he unloaded the digger and the extension pipes.

She'd followed him and demanded suspiciously, "What are you up to?"

He didn't look at her. "How much land you claim?" he asked.

"Why, just what's inside the fence, and the station too."

He jabbed the point of the digger into the ground. "Then up here it's my land, an' I can do anything I want on it?"

"I— I suppose so. But what—"

Frank began his digging. He worked the handle of the digger, lifting it from time to time to empty the dirt from it. At the end of an hour, the hole was down to where he had to fit the first extension to the digger. He wiped sweat from his face and looked around for the girl but Judy had gone back to the stage station, which she had fixed up with frilly curtains on the windows.

By sundown, he had four holes down as far as they'd go, and the last one showed a litle moisture at the bottom. Judy Pace came out of the station, decked in a lacy dress that fitted her snugly. As she walked, she lifted the long skirt to clear the ground and peered down into the holes.

"Goin' to be a fence here," Frank told her. "Right plumb around you, but every inch of it on my property."

"Why are you making the holes so deep, and so close together?"

"Goin' to be a real fence, like none you ever seen before—seven strands, posts set three feet apart. You hankered to keep my cows from gettin' into your garden, an' this ought to do it."

She touched her hair. She'd done something to it that made it glossy in the sunset light. "Well, you'll have to put a gate some place in it, so I can get the buckboard through."

"No gate. An' if I catch you cuttin' my wire, there's goin' to be a ruckus. If my cows got in your garden stuff again, they might catch the hoof-an'-mouth from it, or somethin'."

Judy put her fists on her hips and her eyes flashed. "I get it," she said. "Fencing me out from my own property—or in—till I agree to give you that water. Oh, this is crazy! You can't get away with it. Mr. Lincott will have a few things to say to you, I expect!" She whirled and ran back to the station. . . .

FRANK started another post hole, but soon he stopped and leaned on the handle of the digger. There was lamplight in the station, and he could see the girl moving around. A bruised feeling hovered in his chest. He had lied to her about the fence, not wanting her to know what he was really up to, until he found out whether it would work. Maybe if he went in there and told her he was sorry about cutting the fence and the sign—which he was now—she'd relent.

Just as he made up his mind, and headed for the station, a yellow-wheeled buggy drew up with a flourish. Ben Lincott got down from it and when Judy came out, the lawyer helped her into the rig. Without looking up to where Frank was, they drove off down the canyon, gaily talking and laughing.

It seemed like the girl wasn't mentioning Frank's fence. Maybe she didn't want to spoil the evening's fun by talking business. Frank suddenly recalled that this was Saturday night, the night of the dance.

He was feeling more than bruised now. Judy was a mighty fetching filly, especially with that lace dress. And it was likely that she never would have gotten friendly with that lady-killing lawyer, if it hadn't been for her row with Frank.

He walked back to the post holes, and fitted a couple of extensions together. He reached down into the one that had showed moisture before, and it had several inches of water in it. He climbed onto the wagon and drove down to his camp, where he ate some beans, slicked up, and then saddled his mount for the ride to town. This was one he didn't aim to miss. . . .

It was a pretty gay shindig. Ben Lincott was dancing Judy smoothly around the room when Frank got there. Roarin' Ed Barlock was sitting on a bench, with a couple of his former cowhands and their wives. The oldster had a sleepy-eyed child on each of his bony knees, and he was looking as pleased as if he was their grandpa.

Frank tried to get to Judy's side, but he couldn't quite make it. He was surrounded by the fillies that Ed had tipped off. Each time a dance ended, there were there around him, blocking his path and laughing till he asked one of them for the next dance. And Judy, he saw, was dancing almost every time with Ben Lincott, smiling up at the suave and confident hombre in complete approval of him. Just once, when Frank danced Olga Johansson past Judy and the lawyer, did he manage to catch her eye. The look she gave him would have frozen a lizard. She was, he decided, plenty angry about his fence.

By the time the fiddlers struck up *Home Sweet Home,* Judy and Ben had disappeared from the hall. Frank dodged Olga, and Dacy, and Sarah, and Trenna, and went down the stairs alone. Judy was standing at the corner of the porch, waiting for Lincott to bring his buggy. When she

saw him, she promptly turned her back.

Frank tramped along the sidewalk, cussing some under his breath and not looking where he was going. In front of the Mercantile, he bumped into Lincott, who was untying his livery-stable buggy horse.

"Hold on a minute, Dawson," Lincott said. "On the way into town, Miss Judy was teling me that you're starting to put up a fence around her place. You can't do that, you know. I expect we'll be able to put you in jail for it."

"Fine an' dandy," Frank said. "It ain't her place, an' the fence'd be on my property, an' you can put me in jail for it. Well now, I expect I might's well make that jailin' worth my while." He belted Lincott on the jaw.

The lawyer went down against the hitching post and stayed there, feeling his jaw and unwilling to come up for more. Frank took a step toward him. The lawyer scrambled under the rail, dodged between the rigs that were tied there, and lit out down the street.

Frank got his horse, tied it to the back of the yellow-wheeled buggy, and drove to the hall. He didn't understand the sudden streak of orneryness that had gotten into him. Generally, he was an easy-going hombre who got along with everybody, but now his heart was beating fast and triumphant, and he felt downright mean.

Judy stepped into the buggy before she noticed who was driving it. When she did, she gasped. "Why, where's Mr. Lincott?"

"Had to take care of some urgent legal business," Frank said, belting the buggy horse with the line ends so that it took out with a lunge, and Judy was plopped down into the seat. "Somethin' about puttin' a feller in jail."

Judy looked back, then looked at Frank suspiciously. There wasn't much she could do but sit there in the far corner of the seat, watching him, while he kept the buggy moving so fast that she couldn't jump out.

Nothing more was said. By the time the buggy rolled up Stage Road Canyon, Frank's attack of meanness was gone and he was feeling very meek. When he drew up in front of the stage station, he knew it was now or never. He made a long reach and pulled Judy to him. Then he kissed her, quickly and sort of desperately.

She caught her breath and pushed against his shoulders. But all of a sudden, her arms were tight around his neck, and stayed that way just long enough to set his heart to thumping proper.

Then she broke free, sat very straight, and said, "All right, Romeo, you can just go back to all those foolish girls of yours! Mr. Lincott warned me that you'd try something like this. You thought it would be a slick way of getting around me, didn't you? Well, it won't work, you cowboy heartbreaker!"

She jumped from the buggy and ran into the stage station, slamming the door so hard that dust came down from the porch roof.

Early next morning, Frank returned the buggy to the livery stable it had been rented from in Warbonnet. He didn't see Ben Lincott, and somewhat to his surprise he didn't get arrested either. Maybe that was because he got out of there fast.

Bu when he returned to his camp in the canyon, Judy was waiting for him under the cottonwood, sitting on one of her horses, with her levis wet to the knees and her eyes full of sparks.

"You darn liar!" she said. "I should have known you were up to something besides a fence, with those deep post holes! Water's spouting a foot high from one of them, and your cows are all back. They busted my fence and ate all my garden!" Se hauled the old six-gun from the waistband of her levis.

Frank lifted his hands and gave her a weary grin. "You can put that iron away, gal. I admit I was fakin' about that fence. I thought that if I could hit that underground water some place where you could not claim it—"

"Water!" she cried. "The darn stuff's all over the place, and you better get up there and do something about it!"

"Whatever you say, gal. Happens I'm in love with you an' can't fight you no more."

SOMETHING that might have been the beginning of a smile curved her mouth, but it didn't stay there. "Ha! Don't you go trying that again. I'll bet those fillies in town wouldn't be so silly about you if they knew that your style of courting a girl is to drown her!"

When they came to the stage station, Frank saw that water was gushing from one of the post holes. The garden was a sea of mud, churned by the cows that had eaten everything there and now were chewing their cuds. Boxes and such were floating in front of the station, where the water lapped the porch.

Frank went after the cows, wondering how they'd happened to drift back here so sudden. He saw the girl get off her horse and go splashing to the station and disappear inside. She didn't come out again, either. He reckoned she was busy figuring up a big fat bill for damages.

He got the cows out of what had been the garden, and looked at the spouting water and scratched his head. Not knowing where a man could get a cork to fit a post hole, he had to let the water be. There was plenty of it in Stage Road Canyon now. It swirled past the station, and ran down the canyon for about a hundred yards before it disappeared underground again.

But he drove his cows past the station, not hollering for Judy to come out because he figured he'd better let her cool down, and kept them going until he reached his camp.

He stopped there for a while to think things out. He didn't have the money to pay for any garden, and the stuff had been raised on his land. The more he thought about it the more mixed up he got.

Leaving the cows where they were, he rode over to the south spring, being curious about the sudden drifting of the herd. What he found there, was a nice collection of horse tracks. Not the tracks of his horse, either.

He headed back to his camp.

By the time he got there, it was past noon. Roarin' Ed Barlock was stomping impatiently around under the cottonwood.

"'Bout time you showed up!" Barlock shouted. "Where'n hell you been?"

"Over to the south spring. You have much trouble drivin' them cows of mine up from there?"

Barlock didn't bother to hang his head any. He said, "I just figgered a good way to get some action around here, was to keep you an' the filly plumb occupied with each other, is all. Never did see one of my cowboys have such a passel of trouble with a gal! But you better light out an' help her now. When I headed up here, I seen a buggy come wheelin' down the canyon with her an' that law-shark in it. They was fightin', so I drawed off into some brush before they seen me an' they went by real close. Lincott was talkin' wild about buyin' up desert land in the basin an' runnin' irrigation water to it an' selling it for plenty. Said the gal was goin' to marry 'im.

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Rangeland Love Stories, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: New Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County, No. 03-1962300. Certificate filed in Bronx and N. Y. counties. My Commission expires March 30, 1953. (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

She was cryin' an' sayin' she wasn't, but he sure had holt of her."

Frank rose in his stirrups. "What'd you do about it?"

Ed shrugged. "I ain't in any shape for fast ridin'. B'sides it ain't goin' to melt a gal's heart any to get helped by an ol' ruin like me. You light out. Plenty of time for you to catch 'em."

Frank swore and used his spurs.

He caught up with the buggy far down the canyon. Lincot saw him coming, halted the rig and faced around in the seat. There was a big welt on the lawyer's jaw, but what he said was, "Howdy, Dawson. Too bad you left town in such a hurry last night. I was bringing you something—this!"

He whipped a derringer from the pocket of his coat.

Judy screamed and struck his arm with tanned, little fists. The derringer went off, but its bullet hit the ground. And then Frank, forcing his mount close to the buggy, reached out and got a handful of the lawyer's coat and yanked.

Lincott got pulled from the buggy, and his weight spilled Frank from his horse. They hit the ground, rolled over a few times, and came to their feet, facing each other. Lincott had lost his belly-gun, but his sideburned face was white and set. He made a wild-eyed fight of it this time. Fists thumped against straining bodies and boots stirred the dust. Lincott gasped with sudden pain, missed a wild swing, and was driven back by Frank's hammering blows. The lawyer went down, covering his handsome face with his arms, and stayed there, huddled up.

Old Roarin' Ed jogged up about that time, and dismounted creakily. "I'll watch this slick-dressed coyote. Now let's see you make some headway with that gal over there in the buggy."

That seemed like a pretty good idea to Frank. He turned, wiping sweat from his face and breathing hard. Judy had halted the buggy and was standing up in it, looking back with her hands pressed to her cheeks.

He stalked over, reached up and got a grip on her slim waist, and lifted her down. This time he kissed her brashly, but solemnly. She kised him right back, and whispered, "Oh Frank, I was afraid he was going to kill you!"

"Might have, if you hadn't batted his derringer down. Too bad you picked such a skunk when you went and hired yourself a lawyer!"

"I never did exactly hire him, Frank. That was an idea he thought up when you told him about the trouble up here. He wanted to get on my side of it, because he had the same kind of ideas cowboys get. Then, when he saw all that water, he just seemed to go crazy, and raved about getting rich."

"Wait up a minute, gal! If you didn't hire 'im, why didn't you? Seems you needed a lawyer if you aimed to chase me from that water."

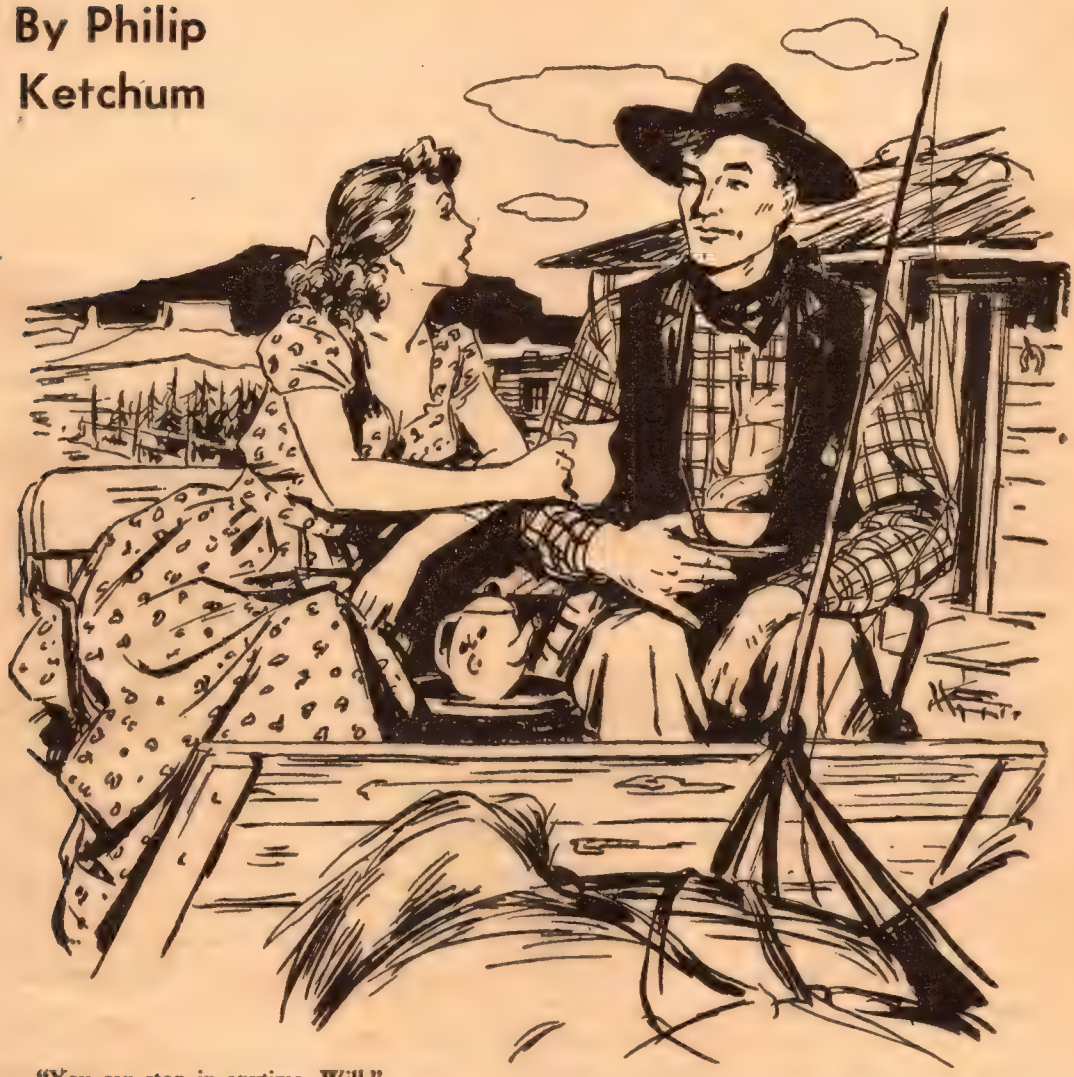
She bit her lip, and her cheeks got rosy as a sunset. "Oh, I guess I'll have to admit I was bluffing. I just wanted you to notice me. You never seemed to, when I was working in the cafe. I thought if you got to tripping over me every time you turned around you'd maybe— But then everything went haywire. You cut my fence, and put up that mean sign, and it made me mad. At the dance, when I tried to make you jealous, all those other girls made *me* jealous instead. Then I woke up in the middle of a lake—"

Frank kissed her a few more times, and then put a hand to his chin and said, "Aw, shucks, it didn't get mashed after all." He cuffed back his hat, and gave Judy a startled look, like he'd just remembered something. "Hey, I thought you didn't like cowboys!"

"Just one certain cowboy," Judy murmured. "And it's a nice dimple—you just keep it around." ♥ ♥ ♥

SODBUSTER'S SWEETHEART

By Philip Ketchum



"You can stop in anytime, Will."

It was nester against cattleman, but the prize, instead of miles of land and grass, was the heart of a lone, courageous girl!

WILL LUDKE woke up, thinking of the Widow Albert. He got up and had his breakfast and later stood in the doorway of his cabin on Wardlaw creek, still thinking of her. But the south field was still to be plowed, harrowed and planted, and there were boulders and tree stumps to be grubbed out, and fence posts

and rails to be cut, and such work didn't get done by itself. So Will Ludke put the Widow Albert out of his mind and went out to harness up his mare.

He had just turned the second furrow in the south field when it occurred to him that the glistening flank of his horse was the same color as Julia Albert's hair, a burnished, golden brown. And as quickly as that, the woman was back in his mind again, to make it hard to go on working. He finished another furrow, then unhooked the plow. "Got to go to town someday," he said aloud. "Got to lay in new supplies. Ain't no sense in putting it off."

But he wasn't thinking of town or the supplies he needed as he shaved or while he put on clean jeans and a freshly washed and ironed blue shirt. In the mirror on the wall, he was staring critically at the reflection of his face. A thin face, angular, deeply tanned, and not too unpleasant when he smiled. He tried the smile now, and practised a speech. "Just stopped by on the way to town, Julia. Thought there might be something you needed."

He listened to the words with his mind, and nodded. They sounded just about right, friendly, casual, neighborly. The smile broadened to a grin. He went outside and hitched up the wagon.

It was mid-afternoon when Will turned off on the side road which led to the Albert homestead. A cool breeze was blowing through the valley, but he was hardly aware of it. His face felt hot and flushed. He mopped a hand over his brow and tried to swallow the choky lump which had settled in his throat. He said his speech over again, but now the words seemed forced and unnatural, and he was terribly afraid Julia would see through him, and see what he really had in mind.

"But I don't have anything in mind," Will told himself stubbornly. "I'm just offering to be helpful. That's all."

His lips tightened, grimly. A scowl came into his face. He drove on.

A boy who was about nine years old came bursting from the cabin as Will reined in outside. The boy jerked a wooden gun from the holster he was wearing, pointing it at Will, and yelled, "Hands up, stranger. Reach 'em high, or you're dead."

Will raised his hands, the scowl disappearing from his face. "Don't shoot," he begged. "Please don't shoot."

"Aw, this is just an old wooden gun," said the boy. "It wouldn't shoot anything. But someday Jim Morrison's going to give me a real gun. And he's going to teach me to shoot it. Jim says you've got to learn young."

Will's scowl was back. This boy was Julia's son, and he seemed on awfully friendly terms with Jim Morrison, a rival rancher living five miles across the valley; an unmarried rancher. It probably wasn't accidental that young Tom Albert knew Jim Morrison, Will thought dourly.

"What can you do?" Tom was asking. "Do you know a quick draw?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Will admitted. "I'm just a farmer."

"There's got to be farmers, I suppose," the boy conceded. "But me, when I grow up, I'm going to run cattle."

A MOVEMENT at the side of the cabin caught Will's attention. He looked that way and saw a taller boy in blue jeans and a blue shirt, and then, his eyes widening, he realized that he was looking at Julia Albert. She came toward him smiling, a hoe over her shoulder. Perspiration streaked her face, a face which wasn't too clean. And she was barefooted. Will had never before seen a woman dressed as Julia. He thought he ought to look away, but couldn't. He could feel his face getting red.

If Julia was embarrassed, however, she didn't show it. "I'm afraid you've caught me in my working clothes, Mr. Ludke," she said easily. "If I'd known we were to have guests, I would have dressed for the occasion."

Will gulped. He tried to remember what he had been going to say when he saw Julia, but the words were nowhere in his mind.

"I can wash this grime off my hands and face in just a minute," Julia continued. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Tea?" The boy sounded disgusted. "Who likes tea?"

"Your friend, Jim Morrison, to name one person," said Julia.

She set the hoe against the side of the cabin, then reached up and brushed back her hair, that glistening brown hair of which Will had been reminded when he was plowing. She was a tall, young woman and there was a healthy color in her face. The jeans she was wearing, Will decided, probably had belonged to her husband. But they weren't much too big, at that. The lost speech came suddenly back to him and he recited it in a hurry. "Just stopped by on the way to town, Julia. Thought there might be something you needed."

A look of interest flashed in Julia's eyes, but before she could say anything, the boy spoke up. "Jim Morrison's bringing our supplies out tonight. Lately, he most always does."

A solid weight plunked down in Will's stomach. A flat taste was in his mouth. He stared at Julia and from the flush in her face he could fill in all that Tom had left unsaid, and more. Julia had guessed why he had stopped here. Julia had seen through his feeble words. He would have been grateful if the ground had opened and swallowed him.

"Guess I'll be getting on then," he muttered.

"You wouldn't care for the tea?" asked Julia.

"Some other time," said Will.

But there would be no other time. He knew that as he turned his team and headed back to the road. He was too late. He had started thinking of Julia too late. Or perhaps he would never have had a chance with her. That was more likely.

"A woman in pants," he growled. "Who wants a woman in pants?"

Of course, when he said that, he was talking in the wind, and he knew it. . . .

For a month, Will Ludke hated himself for having been weak-hearted and cowardly. For a month, he lashed himself for having refused Julia's invitation to tea. Then, for a second month, he worked on building up his courage. He was as good a man, he told himself, as Jim Morrison. His farm would someday be finer than Morrison's cattle ranch. A man of substance lived up to his role, and if he wanted a woman like Julia, the thing to do was to come right out and say so.

Will Ludke did. He came right out and said what he wanted in speeches rehearsed as he plowed and harrowed and planted. He did in wishful thinking and in his dreams. And then one morning, working in the garden he had planted near his cabin, it came to him that he had a mighty nice crop of peas and that Julia Albert might like a sackful.

"I could tell her I grew too many to use," said Will, as he harvested the entire crop. "I could say I didn't want to see them go to waste and that maybe she could can them, or something."

He was beginning to grow excited. He paused for a moment in his harvest. "After that," he declared, "we could talk of other things."

Again, in mid-afternoon, he turned up the side road to the Albert homestead, and as he stopped his wagon in the yard, Tom Albert came charging at him from around the corner of the cabin, screaming, "Bang! Bang! You're dead."

The gun in the boy's hand, this time, looked like a real gun, and it was, except that the chamber was missing.

"You didn't give me a chance," Will complained.

"There's a reward on your head," said Tom Albert. "You're a dangerous outlaw. You didn't deserve a chance. What do you

think of this gun? Part of it had to be sent away to get fixed, but as soon as Jim Morrison gets it back, I can fire real bullets."

"That you can," said a voice from the doorway, a man's voice.

Will looked up and saw Jim Morrison and Julia Albert. They had just come out of the house. Morrison's coat was over his arm. His shirt was open at the throat. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, young man, undeniably handsome. There was a wide grin on his face. Julia was wearing a dress, long and flowery, tight at the waist and showing too much of her shoulders. It made her look very feminine, but then, she had looked just as feminine in jeans.

"Hello, Mr. Ludke," she called, moving toward the wagon.

Her voice couldn't have been more friendly, or her smile warmer. Will was biting his lips. This would have been perfect, just perfect, if Jim Morrison hadn't had to be here. Or maybe Morrison was there all the time, now. He couldn't keep a scowl from his face.

"I can still offer you that tea," said Julia.

"I've no time for it," Will answered. "I've got to get on to town."

HEARING those words, Will wondered why he had said them. He hadn't meant to. The next time Julia offered him tea he had promised himself to accept the invitation. A dozen different speeches of acceptance had been practised over and over.

"That's too bad," said Julia. "I was hoping you could stop, and that maybe you could give me some advice about the corn we've put in."

"This isn't corn land, Julia," said Morrison. "I've already told you that."

"The land here will grow corn," said Will instantly. And he glared at Morrison as he said that, as though daring Morrison to again disagree.

"Well, Jim. What did I tell you?" said Julia. "There's no better farmer in these parts than Mr. Ludke. If he says my land will grow corn, it will. Perhaps you'd better stick to running cattle."

Will felt immeasurably better. He remembered the sack of peas in the wagon. In a way, they were a supporting evidence of the claims Julia had made for him. He doubted if anyone, anywhere around here, had grown finer peas.

"I planted some peas this spring, Julia," he mentioned. "But they grew too fast for me. I've got more than I know what to do with. I thought maybe you could use some."

"Fresh peas," Julia cried. "Why didn't I think of planting some?"

Will climbed over the wheel of the wagon, then lifted the sack of peas to the ground. It was a gunny sack, full to the top.

Julia gasped. "So many as that," she said. "But what will I do with them?"

"I thought maybe you could can some," said Will.

"You know, I've got an idea, Julia," said Jim Morrison. "Let's get some of the crowd from town, some of the young folks and some of the old, and throw a pea shelling bee. We could make it a regular party, and let's have it soon, tomorrow night. It's just the thing to do. You could never shell all these peas yourself, anyway."

"But Jim—"

"Nope," said Jim Morrison. "That's it—and that's final. I'll work out all the plans myself. Now, everything's settled. I better get started Julia, but I'll see you again this evening. Nice of you to bring the peas, Ludke."

And with that, he hurried around the corner of the cabin to where his horse was tied.

Will Ludke scowled. He stared down at the sack of peas.

"Jim is awfully impulsive," said Julia. "Awfully young. The shelling bee was his idea, of course. But you'll come."

Will shook his head. "I don't know," he said doubtfully. "It's a long ways to where I live. I'd be driving most all night to get

myself here and then to get home again."

"But you could leave early."

Will shrugged his shoulders. "I'll see," he said. He stared at the peas, hating them, then climbed back into the wagon.

Julia's voice was soft. "We haven't had our tea, Will," she said.

"Tea!" said Tom Albert. He snickered, and then, racing away, he whirled and ran for the corner of the cabin, screaming. "There goes the outlaw, but I'll get him. Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Julia frowned. "A boy of Tom's age is certainly a problem," she said slowly. "Sometimes I don't know what to do with him. All he's interested in, right now, is guns, and outlaws, and being a cowboy."

"He's still just a boy," said Will.

"But I'm worried about how he'll grow up. Will you wait here a minute?"

Will nodded and Julia hurried into the house. She was gone several minutes. When she came out again, she was carrying a tray on which were two steaming cups of tea. There was a twinkle in her eyes as she came up to the wagon.

"I just knew you wouldn't come into the house," she declared, "so I brought the tea out here. Careful now. Set the tray on the seat, next to you. Then help me up."

Will took the tray a little awkwardly. He set it on the seat of the wagon, then turned to give Julia a hand. She climbed over the wheel, brushing her skirts aside, laughing, and moving past him to the other side of the seat, the tray between them.

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble," he growled.

"Trouble?" Julia smiled. "It was no trouble. The hot water was on the stove And I'm a stubborn woman, Mr. Ludke. When I invite a man to tea, I'm serious about it."

The thing to do, Will told himself, was to climb down and carry the tea inside, and to stay there a while and talk. He took a quick look at Julia. She was holding her cup in her hand and watching him as though waiting for him to join her. Will reached for the other cup of tea. It was strong and hot.

"I could get some sugar," Julia said.

Will would have liked some sugar but he shook his head and sipped his tea, trying to remember some of the speeches he had practised for an occasion such as this. Those he could recall, however, didn't seem to fit in. They would sound abrupt and sudden and crude.

Tom Albert came into sight from behind the cabin, chasing some elusive outlaw. As he saw them in the wagon, he stopped.

"What you doing up there, Mom?" he demanded.

"Having tea with Mr. Ludke," said Julia. "Your outlaws are escaping, darling."

"Tea," muttered the boy. "Around here, it's always tea." He wandered off.

"Tell me about your land," said Julia. "They say you have the finest place in the valley."

"It's good land," Will agreed. But the usual enthusiasm he had when talking about his place, was lacking. He finished his tea. He set the cup back on the tray and took another quick glance at Julia. She was looking straight ahead, smiling faintly at some thought which he couldn't even guess. A many times practised speech came to Will's mind. He said, "Julia, it would be nice if—"

She turned toward him. "Yes, Will?"

But Will couldn't go on. The invitation to visit his place stuck in his throat. He could feel his cheeks getting red. Julia would have no interest in what he might have to offer. It was too far away from town, too far away from neighbors.

"I ought to be getting on," Will mumbled.

"All right, Will, but tell me, what 'would be nice?' "

"A cup of tea, occasionally. That is—"

"You can stop in anytime, Will."

Julia's eyes were very direct. Will couldn't meet the look in them. He couldn't

think of anything to say. Anything but, "I guess I ought to be getting on."

IN THE days which followed, however, he had plenty to say to himself, all of it consisting of the things he could have done, or should have done. He could have stayed longer. He could have told her of his land and his dreams for it. He could have inspected her corn fields, could have insisted on carrying the tea tray back into the cabin, could have held her hand a moment longer when helping her down from the wagon. Slowly, his self-disgust seeped through him. He felt the need to escape, strike out for new parts, but there was no place to go.

Will stayed on his farm for a week, growing more angry at himself with each passing day. At the end of that time, he saddled up and headed for town, not taking the wagon this trip. And he made better time on the long journey, passing the turn off to the Albert homestead just after noon, passing it stubbornly. He had never had any luck stopping here on the way to town. This time, he would stop on the way back, along toward evening.

In town, Will stepped into Ghezzi's grocery for a sack of tobacco he didn't need, and to pass the time of day with Tim Ghezzi who knew everyone in the valley and everything that was going on, and who loved to talk.

"I suppose you'll be at the wedding," said Ghezzi.

"Wedding?" Will repeated. "What wedding?"

"Jim Morrison and the Widow Albert. I hear they're getting hitched."

Will's heart turned over, then sank into the bottom of his stomach like a heavy stone.

"I hadn't heard about it," he muttered. "When's it to be?"

"Most any day, now, I reckon," said Tim Ghezzi, and he chuckled. "Jim's had a hard time of it, however, getting the widow to agree. He's finally had to resort to getting help from Pete Mobridge, the land agent. He took Pete out to the widow's place about an hour ago to help convince her that her crop's a failure, and the best thing she can do is put her patent up for sale. But as they say, all's fair in love and war."

"Is it?" said Will Ludke. "Is it?"

He tore out the door, ran to his horse and threw himself into the saddle. He made good time getting back to the Albert homestead. Mighty good time. And as he cut in toward the house, he took a quick, searching look at Julia's corn field. The corn wasn't as high as his and some of it had topped early, but the crop didn't look like a failure to him. Not yet, anyhow. In fact, for the work of a woman and a boy, it looked mighty good.

They were standing in the yard, talking, as he rode up, Julia, Tom, Jim Morrison and Pete Mobridge, who Will gave an uneasy look as he dismounted. Tom probably said, "Bang! Bang! You're dead," or something like that, but Will wasn't aware of it. He glanced at Julia, who was frowning, and whose nod of welcome showed the strain she was feeling.

"An inspection or something?" asked Will, staring at Pete Mobridge. "Since when did a land agent become an inspector of crops?"

"I just came out because Jim asked me to," said Mobridge uncertainly. "I just came out to have a look."

"And have you had it?" asked Will.

Anger was still riding him. He almost snapped the words.

"And what's it to you?" asked Jim Morrison, scowling.

WILL turned to face him. "I know corn. You don't, and I doubt if Mobridge does. I can see from here the field's got a good stand. I'd be willing to bet there'll be a good harvest. Is that what you told Julia?"

"It isn't," said Julia, and her face was faintly pink. "They said they were afraid

most of the ears would never mature. They said the crop wasn't any good because the land wasn't any good. They also advised me to stop trying to grow corn and sell out."

Will's fists were clenched. He looked at Mobridge. "Get out," he said. "Get on your cayuse and ride."

"I was just going," said Mobridge. "Of course, I might be wrong about the corn, but just the same—"

"Get out," said Will again, taking a step in his direction.

Mobridge gave Jim Morrison a dark look, then turned toward his horse.

"You, too," said Will, glaring at Morrison.

"Listen Ludke, you're not giving orders around here yet," said Morrison, his face hot and flushed, "and I'll—"

"You'd better go, Jim," said Julia.

Morrison wheeled as though unwilling to believe what he had heard. "But Julia—" he spluttered.

"You'd better go," said Julia once more. "You heard what Will said. I don't think you'd like what he might do if you stayed. Heaven only knows what he'd do."

Morrison glowered. He ran his fingers through his hair. He looked at Will again, who was as big as he was, and after a moment he shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he muttered, "if that's the way you want it. But think things over carefully, Julia. Mobridge is the land agent and Ludke here—is only a dirt farmer."

Julia was silent. She stood watching Jim Morrison walk toward his horse. Then, after he and Mobridge had left, she looked at Will.

"Wait here for a moment," she suggested, and turned toward the house.

Will mopped his hand over his face. He looked at Tom Albert, and grinned.

"You didn't have a gun," said Tom, wide-eyed. "They both had guns, but you chased them off without one. You must be awfully brave. I want to be brave when I grow up."

"You don't always need a gun, Tom," Will answered. "It's nice to know how to use one but you don't ever want to get dependent on it. I've got a gun at home. I can even show you how to use it."

"Will you?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

Julia came out into the yard with the tea tray in her hands. Her eyes were laughing. She said, "I know you won't come inside, so I brought this out here."

"We'll have our tea inside," said Will, firmly.

He took the tray from Julia's hands and started toward the cabin, then looked back.

"We'll have the tea inside," he declared. "And after that you're going to listen to some speeches I've been rehearsing, but which I've never had the nerve to say."

"Will I like them?" asked Julia.

"I intend to make you like them," said Will, offering her his arm.

Julia smiled. She glanced at Tom and said, "Tom, keep busy for a while chasing bandits, won't you, honey?" Still smiling, she took Will's arm, and together they headed toward the cabin. ♥ ♥ ♥

Invest in Tomorrow

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LOVERS RIDE THE DEADLINE

By Isabel Stewart Way

THE SEVEN-UP outfit should have been trail-worn and weary. For days they had been riding, gathering together the vast herd of market beefs up in Mirage Valley, hazing them through Mirage Canyon on their way to the empty cattle cars at the Junction, beyond the lower valley.

But there was no sign of weariness as the outfit made its evening camp near the lower end of the big gulley. The Beesons—the six men and the girl—were in a holiday mood; bursting with high spirits.

Laughter, loud banter, and shouts followed Kitty Beeson, slim and lovely in her blue riding clothes, when she rode off toward the mouth of the canyon. Even the food cooking sent a festive smell drifting

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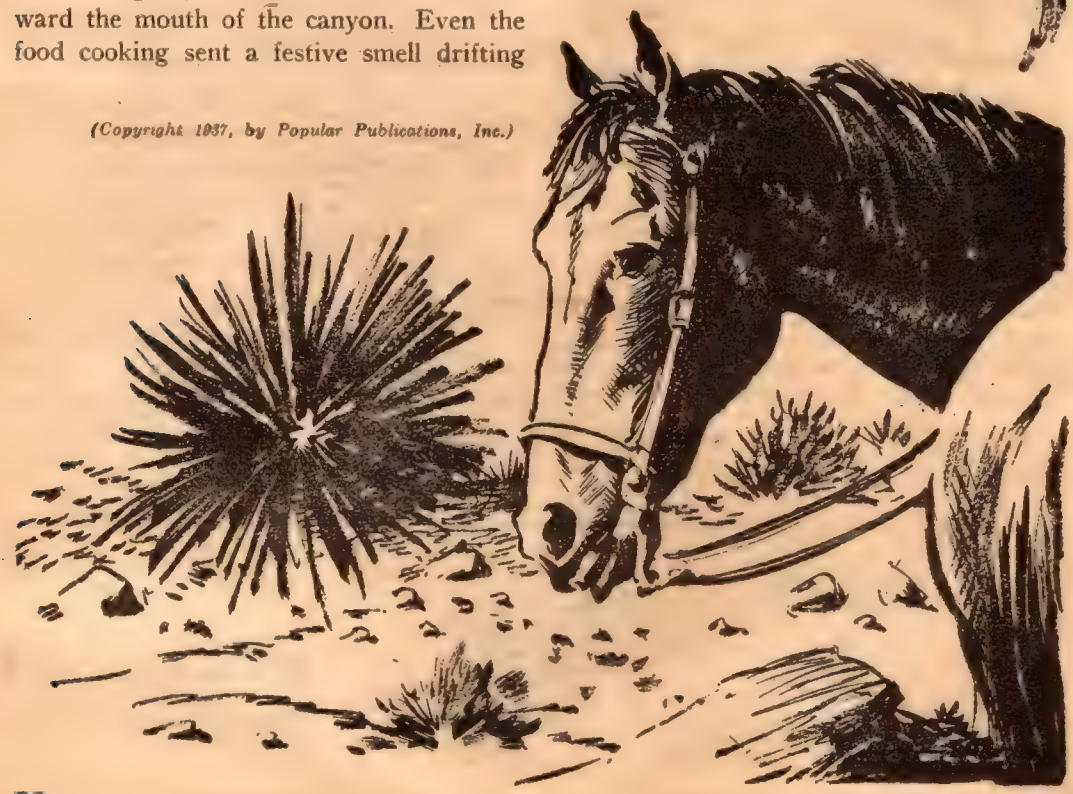

Princess of a vast cattle empire, Kitty headed up the Sun Dance trail, to keep her tryst with the man who'd declared undying war on all cowmen—and undying love for one cowman's daughter!

A thousand flames leaped through her veins and she was close in his arms.

after her: the rich aroma of frying steaks and potatoes, beans baked with molasses, and sizzling pork, freshly made dried-apple pies, set along the chuck wagon tongue to cool.

Kitty turned in her elaborately tooled saddle and smiled back at the camp, where her father and five brothers stood. Kitty adored her menfolk. There was her father, whose name of Bender Beeson had long since been changed—deservedly—to Hellbender. There were the older twins, Ben and Bus, who were just twenty-one; Chuck, not quite twenty; Eli, nineteen; and Karl, Kitty's own eighteen-year-old twin.

As like as peas in a pod were the handsome male Beesons—tall, broad-shouldered, with thick, curly, black hair, flashing, dark eyes, and devil-may-care grins. Each had a deeply-cleft dimple in the chin, a row of strong lines between the heavy, black brows. Hellbender, himself, stood perhaps two inches taller than the others, and he looked only a little older.

"Where you goin', Kittimount?" he roared jovially. "You're always the first to holler for grub, and now you're ridin' off when the cook's about to yell."

"I'll be back," she called. "Don't you worry." And she sent her horse around a turn, where the canyon narrowed.

Her blue eyes shone with excitement. She hurried her magnificent black gelding along. Her hand trembled a bit as she pushed back a few butter-yellow curls that had escaped her blue Stetson. Her eagerness had a deep note. To the menfolk, the cattle drive promised excitement, thrills. To Kitty, it meant but one thing—a chance to see Jared Elder again.

She had written Jared that she would be here on this date. There had been no time for a reply, but she knew that the red-headed, young editor of the *Sun Dance Bugler* would be riding up to camp this evening. From the opening of the canyon, she could see the Sun Dance road, and if there were a cloud of dust. . . .

There was more than that. There was the thudding of hoofs, close at hand. Kitty reined in Selim and the slim, golden-haired girl on the shining black, with the silver-trimmed riding gear glistening in the sunset's rays, waited in motionless beauty.

Kitty's heart pounded crazily when she saw the rangy, raw-boned gray come into the far end of the narrow, low-walled gully. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of the red-headed rider, who had taken off his shabby hat, to beat the dust from it. Foolishly, she wanted to turn Selim and run away from the delicious moment when she would meet Jared again, after all these months. Then he saw her, waved his hat.

"Kitty!" he grinned, as he came stirrup-close. "Kitty!" His big hand went out, caught hers, held it tightly, and his happy, worshipping eyes devoured her. "Kitty, I—I reckon I'd forgotten how lovely you are."

Little golden lights flared in the smoky depths of his eyes. Kity swayed toward him. Then she was close in his arms. Her yellow head was drawn over to his shoulder, and his lips were upon her hair, her face, her mouth, sending a thousand little flames leaping through her veins.

She rested in his arms for a moment after that kiss. The two horses stood motionless, as if they understood.

SHE WHISPERED, "I'm so glad you came, Jared. You hadn't come to the Seven-up for so long. Even your letters were far apart. Sometimes I was afraid that you had forgotten us all—the whole Seven-up and me!"

A strangely grim look passed over Jared's face. She felt his arms grow rigid. "No, I didn't forget you nor the Seven-up," he said gravely. Then he was silent, his eyes going up the canyon, toward the camp.

The cook's call was sounding. "Come and get it! Chuck-away!" The beat of the pan sent echoes tumbling among the rocks, frightening the cattle to protest.

"Kitty, you shouldn't have come." Jared turned to her, tiredly. "This drive is no place for you."

She laughed. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. I had to stay home last year, but I'm eighteen now, and I made them let me come. The boys say this will be the most exciting drive we've ever made."

"Exciting?" His gray eyes probed hers. "Kitty, did you know that two lives were lost during that drive last year?"

A frown appeared between her finely-etched, dark brows. "That wasn't our fault. If the nesters are bound to fight, they'll get hurt."

"One of them was a friend of mine," Jared told her. "Clancy Moon, owner of the Half Moon. And he was only fighting to protect his home, his property, his rights."

"His rights?" Kitty stared at him in amazement. "Why, dad has driven cattle across Chula Valley for twenty years. Then these nesters come in and try to stop him—you talk about their rights!"

"Yes." Jared nodded. "When your father started sending his cattle down to the railroad this way, there were no ranchers in the lower valley except the Arrow-D, which lies out of his path. But times have changed. Chula Valley is settled up now. To send the cattle across means that your outfit must cut fences and ruin good grazing land."

Kitty's eyes blazed dangerously. To Kitty, her father and her brothers could do no wrong. "You'd have us quit?" she demanded. "You'd give us no chance to market our beefs? You'd ruin us—for the sake of those nesters?"

"Kitty, I worked for months to get the railroad to send a spur line to Kneecut, and I did it to give your father an outlet to market. It's closer, that way. All he has to do is to make the short drive over Poker Pass, then down the state road to Kneecut. Instead, he comes here, aimin' to fight his way across."

"And you think you can stop him?" Kitty asked contemptuously, her anger a dull, aching pain within her.

"I'm aimin' to do just that—in one way or another!"

Kitty's laugh was scornful. "You talk as if the Seven-up was planning a raid—instead of a cattle drive."

"It is a raid," he said grimly. "A cowardly raid, honey."

Kitty's hand gripped the quirt tighter; her eyes snapped fire as wrath filled her. She glared at Jared.

"You dare accuse my family of being cowards?" she blazed. "Jared Elder, don't you ever speak to me again! I hate you!"

She wheeled Selim, sent him at a run up the canyon. She heard the gray's hoofs close behind, all the way to the camp, where the Seven-up men were already eating.

"Well, here you are!" her father said. "What's the matter, Kittimount? Satan at your heels? Oh, I see. . . ." His dark eyes went to Jared. "Not Satan—only the young Sun Dance editor. Light and eat with us, Jared." He went forward, held out his hand.

Jared shook his head, looking down at the hand. "I won't shake hands yet," he said. "Not till you know my errand, and I'm sure you want to take my hand."

He dismounted, stood there measuring glances with Hellbender Beeson. With queer pride, in spite of her anger, Kitty noted how lithe-muscled he looked in his brown clothes, with the green kerchief tied at one side.

"I came to bring you a warning, Hellbender," Jared said, "to tell you that you can't drive your cattle across Chula Valley."

A MURMUR went up from the Seven-up crowd, but Hellbender silenced it with a quick gesture of his big hand. "So I've got to turn tail and drive my cattle back!" he mocked in derision. "All the way back to the Seven-up, without sellin' a dog-goned critter!"

Jared nodded as he pulled out his tobacco by the tag dangling from his pocket. "Looks that way. You'll be a little late in loadin', but you're lucky to get a chance at all. Folks are hollerin' for them empty cars, all up and down the line. If I hadn't ordered 'em shunted up to Kneecut, you'd be out, entirely."

"What!" Hellbender's wrath broke with an explosion. "You ordered them cars away? Well, you get 'em back on the sidin' at Chula Junction by tomorrow, or. . . ." He took two steps forward.

Jared didn't flinch. His eyes were like steel as he stared at Hellbender; calmly, he rolled his cigarette.

"You won't want those cars at the Junction," he said. "There's to be no repetition of last year—no more killin's, no more rustlin's."

Kitty gasped. The six male Beesons grew tense. Hellbender's hand hovered close to his holster.

"Rustlin'! he roared. "You dare to accuse me an' my boys of rustlin'? Why—"

Jared paid no heed to the menacing men before him. "Cattle were rustled the night of last year's raid," he repeated. "The Bar-B, the Half-Moon, the Lazy-J, all lost cattle. That's one reason why we've organized the Cattlemen's Protective League, with Deke Dart to head it." His mouth tightened to grimmer lines, but he went on, "They are ready to turn you back, Beeson. Sun Dance is full of men, gathering for defense. They're all armed, and if you start across, it means that range war is on."

"Then range war it is!" Hellbender rumbled. "We're goin' through, sometime between midnight and sun-up. Tell your nesters that. Even if we have to shoot a path, the Seven-up is goin' through."

Jared nodded, leaped again to the saddle. Then he turned to Kitty; his smoky gray eyes held hers. For a moment it seemed to Kitty as if her heart were hammering in her throat. She took a step forward, then stopped, remembering that Jared Elder was an enemy, that he had dared to question her family's right to go where they pleased and do what they wished. He had even accused them of rustling.

She turned away, staring at the beef herd, which was grazing up in the canyon. They were sleek and fat, for they had been brought down in easy stretches. They were good cattle—yet she wondered, all at once, if they were worth all this turmoil.

Jared was speaking. "You'd better let me take Kitty to safety, at least. I've been your friend for a long time, Hellbender!"

"I'll take care of my girl," the older man returned curtly, "just as I managed the rest of my business."

Jared started away, tight-lipped, then stopped, pulled a newspaper from his saddlebags and tossed it at Beeson.

"This'll give you some idea of what's doin'," he said shortly. "Maybe you'll see why it won't be safe for Kitty here," and then he was gone, riding away as unconcernedly as if he didn't know he had left fury raging in the heart of everyone there. Even Kitty knew a black, surging ache that she thought to be hatred.

CHAPTER TWO

A Guide to Enemy Territory

HELLBENDER WAS unfolding the *Bugler*. "That fightin' fool from Sun Dance must think he's got a big city paper. He calls this an extra." There was contempt in his tone.

The boys crowded around him. Even Ben, one of the older twins, who had seemed to grow graver these past months, was craning his neck to see the black type.

"It's about us," Hellbender chuckled. "We can't all read at once. Kittimount, you read it aloud—with all the proper motions."

One of the boys lifted her to a wagon bed; another handed her the paper. Then the whole outfit crowded up to hear.

"IT'S TIME TO ACT!" the banner headline read. Then, below, in blackface type, appeared the front-page editorial.

"Too long the men of Chula Valley have been at the mercy of a few!" Kitty read. "Divided, we have seen our homes despoiled, our herds plundered, and our comrades killed. When Hellbender Beeson made his cattle drive last year, we were not prepared. This year must tell a different story. Already Hellbender Beeson is on his way! Already his beefs are in Mirage Canyon, starting down. Let us organize to keep him from leaving the canyon! All Chula cowmen are urged to be in Sun Dance on Thursday morning to form a Protective League. The First Nugget Dance Hall had been secured for the place of meeting. Let every cowman be there! Twill Currey, half-owner of the Bar-B will act as chairman of the meeting. Guns will be left in care of Baldy Roberts, the First Nugget bartender."

Kitty stopped, anger draining the color from her face.

"Why, Jared organized them!" she choked. "He worked them up to organize against us! He did it!"

"I reckon he did," Hellbender said, and poured himself another cup of coffee. "Looks like they mean business. And Sun Dance ain't likely to be a healthy spot for a Beeson, right now."

"Listen!" It was Eli, the most reckless of the bunch. "We got some time to pass away. Let's ride down to Sun Dance for a drink. I crave some First Nugget liquor."

"Well, strike me for a wall-eyed cow!" Karl struck Eli between the wide shoulders. "The idea does you proud."

Hellbender grinned, put a hand on Kitty's yellow head. "Come on, Kittimount, you ain't eaten a bite."

Kitty smiled, though her eyes felt misty, and she was torn by the tumult within her.

She caught her father's hand. "I'll eat and be ready to ride down to Sun Dance with you and the boys."

"You're ridin' to Sue Minard's, where it's safe," Hellbender said grimly. "The boys'll draw lots to see who takes you."

"I'm going with you," Kitty insisted. She was the only one of Hellbender's children who dared stand against his will. "Just because I'm a girl, I won't be sent out of the fun, I won't miss it, like I did last year."

They were still arguing when their second visitor came.

"It's Deke Dart, from the Arrow-D," Eli said.

Hellbender walked to meet the newcomer. "Light and eat," he greeted as Dart rode up, "if you come as a friend."

Deke Dart's laugh brought almost feminine dimples to his smooth cheeks and showed his even, white teeth. A handsome man was the owner of the Arrow-D; dark-haired, dark-eyed, in his early thirties. He had inherited the ranch from his uncle less than two years before.

"I don't wonder that you ask," he said, "seein' the way the Chula ranchers have been prodded into a ructious mood by that red-headed, young editor."

"Seems like you're in it, too," Hellbender observed. "Seems like I heard you was elected head of the new league."

"Yes," Deke admitted, taking off his Stetson to dust it with a clean bandana. "They elected me because I'm on neither side. The way the Arrow-D lays, you don't pester me by goin' to market across Chula. I took the job, aimin' to keep peace. That's why I'm here. That—and another reason. . . ." His bold eyes went to Kitty, resting on her in open admiration.

"There's been enough palaver," said Hellbender. "I'm takin' my cattle to market, as I always have."

Deke leaned forward confidentially. "I hope you do," he said. "These nesters ain't helped the Arrow-D any. Chula used to be all open range, but now it's fenced and I've had to pull in my horns. Can't run half the cattle Uncle Vash used to. So

if you'll just get the jump on 'em—start before midnight and take 'em unexpected —I won't be tryin' to stop you!"

"We'll start when we said we would," Hellbender growled. "We're goin' through, and the devil himself can't stop us."

Deke shrugged. "The men are sure rarin' for a fight." Then, looking at Kitty. "What you doin' with her, when hell starts poppin'?" He smiled warmly at the yellow-haired girl.

"I'm sendin' her down to the Junction to stay with Bill Minard's Sue. Bill will look after Kitty, till I come for her."

"She can go along with me," Deke said. "I'll see her to Minards."

Kitty threw back her head rebelliously, ready to resume battle, then seemed to think better of it. "Why not?" she asked meekly. "It'll save one of the boys from crossing the valley alone."

THE WESTERN hills were already throwing long shadows as Kitty rode along beside Deke Dart. They followed a well defined trail between the fenced grazing lands.

"They've spoiled everything!" Kitty broke out. "These little ranchers coming in!" She waved a hand toward the Bar-B, sprawling across the mouth of the canyon, toward the Lazy-J and the Half-Moon, over to the west.

"You're right," Deke agreed. "And we've got that red-headed editor down in Sun Dance to thank for 'em. They was ready to give up, then he took up their cudgels. I reckon he felt it bad," he chuckled, "on account of him wantin' the Half-Moon for hisself!"

"What do you mean?" Kitty gasped.

"Well, Clancy Moon's widow, Virginia, is right pretty, and only twenty—in spite o' the two-year-old boy. Jared Elder's been ridin' that gray of his right reg'lar across Chula, to the Half-Moon. He's allus had an eye for a pretty girl."

Kitty stared ahead with tightened lips. So that was the reason Jared had joined the nesters and had stopped riding out to the Seven-up. She had written him, believing what he'd told her last year, that he loved her. She had as much as thrown her heart at him. And all the time he had been seeing another girl!

"He'll poke too deep into other folks' business some day," she flared. "Then he and his nesters will be through in Chula."

"Right you are, Kitty. And I'm lookin' forward to it. I'm lookin' to the day when the Arrow-D will be back to its old greatness, and I can ask a certain gold-haired girl to come and live there."

His arms slipped about her, and for a moment Kitty closed her eyes, remembering that other embrace. Jared had held her close and kissed her this very evening—when he was betraying her and her father, and inciting war against the Seven-up. Shaking off the memory, Kitty suddenly sent Selim forward. She didn't want any man's caress.

They rode on, with Kitty keeping ahead of Deke, until they came to a fork in the road. She pulled up.

"We take the west fork," Deke said, "straight to the Junction. The other goes to Sun Dance where a hoss with the Seven-up brand wouldn't be so danged pop'lar."

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to Sun-Dance," she declared.

"You can't, Kit! There'd be no knowin' what would happen."

"They won't hurt a girl; they're cowmen. Probably they'll not even know who I am . . . but I'd like to brag to the boys afterwards, that I spent the night in enemy country."

A moment's silence, then Deke Dart laughed. His dark eyes were admiring. "You're just the way I like 'em, Kit. Spirited, full of fight. I'll take you—but you got to be mighty careful. If anything should happen to you, I'd—"

"I promise," she nodded, and turned into the Sun Dance trail.

CHAPTER THREE

"Kill the Beesons!"

DARKNESS fell, and light sprang into windows just before they reached the edge of the small, busy cowtown.

At the church, they stopped and Kitty spoke. "Thanks a lot, Deke. Don't come any further; it would only call attention to me and make folks know you're our friend. I'll slip around to the hotel."

She held out her hand, but he didn't take it. Instead, he leaned over, kissed her, full upon the lips. Anger flamed. Kitty started to speak, then stopped. She deserved that, for using Deke to gain what she wanted. Anyway, Deke was loyal. He was no red-headed traitor, stirring up trouble for honest cowmen!

"You're good, Deke," she said impulsively, then swung Selim into the single main street.

As she went past the vacant commons that separated the church from the saloons and business district, she heard Deke's horse drumming back out of Sun Dance, but she paid no heed. Excitement filled her. At the end of the vacant lot, she saw the office of the *Bugler*, with a light in the back. She heard the rumbling of the press, and she knew something deeper than excitement....Hurt and humiliation and anger—and a sudden, sharp memory of Jared's kisses upon her lips!

She brought her palm down hard upon Selim's flank, and turned her eyes away from the little wooden building where Jared Elder worked. At the other end of the street, the Golden Palace Hotel stood. Adjoining the hotel, was the First Nugget Saloon and Dance Hall—headquarters of the Protective League. She would ride there; would prove to Jared Elder and all his cohorts that the Beesons were not afraid!

A cry of command sounded. She turned, saw a figure running across the sidewalk, into the street. Kitty fought down the breathlessness that gripped her at sight of Jared Elder.

He caught the bridle. "You must be crazy, coming here!" He pulled Selim around, led him off the street, across the sidewalk and into the shadows alongside the office, before Kitty could catch her breath.

"Let go that bridle!" she flared. "How dare you stop me?"

He looked at her for a moment, then reached up, lifted her down from the saddle. "Come, Kitty," he said. "I'll show you why."

Numb under the dizzy emotion his nearness brought her, Kitty let herself be led to the rear door of the *Bugle* office, then inside, where the clean smell of ink and damp paper mingled with the odor of new pine from the walls. Past the single type cabinet, with its half-opened drawers, containing perhaps a half-dozen fonts of type; past the small stone make-up table; and the wooden-framed hand-press, with its inky roller still set—they went into the small, front office.

The curtains were drawn, and there was no light. Kitty pulled off her hat, backed against the unpainted table that served as a desk. She faced him, trembling a little, but watching him intently.

Jared came close. "Kitty," he said huskily, "why did this have to happen to us? Happiness seemed so near. And now—"

His arms slipped around her and his head dropped until his cheek rested upon her hair. Then she felt his lips against her cheek Again Kitty felt a flow of elation that made her forget her hatred, forget everything except this man. Gently, she raised her soft mouth for his kiss.

"Jared!" she whispered. "Jared!"

They stood there together, without speaking. From outside, the distant dance hall music, the constant clatter of hoofs, the voices of men, beat against their silence, penetrating Jared's consciousness. He

jerked up his head, stared toward the shaded window.

"Come on, honey!" He pulled her to the window, drew aside the shade to let her peer out. "Look out there!"

THE COWTOWN was alive with men, Kitty saw now. The batwing saloon doors fanned constant streams of light upon knots of grim-faced men, gathered along the street. Ominous groups they were, with filled holsters prominent. For the first time, a mite of worry seeped into Kitty's mind. She shivered.

"They're all armed to protect themselves against the Seven-up drive," Jared said quietly. "They're the Chula cattlemen, Kitty."

"The ones you incited against dad and the boys!" She whirled to face him. "I'd forgotten that for the moment, Jared Elder, but I'll never forget it again. You made them organize. You called them together. Tonight you flaunted the notice of that meeting in our faces."

"Yes, that's true." He nodded. "On the other hand—"

"There isn't any other hand," she declared firmly. "You pretended to be our friend, and you're a traitor! And—I despise double-crossing traitors!"

She started for the door, but he caught her. A sudden silence had fallen over the town. The shouts ceased. There was only the tinkle of the music falling upon the air. Then she heard another sound—the steady slog of horses' hoofs approaching town.

Jared drew Kitty back to the window. A low exclamation burst from his lips, but Kitty knew a fierce pride at what she saw.

The moon had come up, big and round and red, rising from a boil of smoky clouds, setting the world on fire. Out of that red moon, it seemed, Kitty saw her father and brothers riding into Sun Dance, with horses whose coats shone splendidly, whose riding gear shimmered under the first moonlight.

They rode carelessly, paying no heed to the heavy silence that hung over the town like an angry pall. Not a Beeson hand went to holster; not a side glance of fear did any give. At the hotel hitchrack, they tied their mounts; then—with Hellbender in the lead—they strode into the First Nugget Saloon. The Beesons acted unaware of the tense situation which they had created.

"Damn!" Jared perked out. "Kitty, wait here!" He was strapping on his two gun belts, one crossing the other. "If there's firin', get to the floor, and stay quiet." Then he was gone, leaping to his saddled horse before the office, galloping the scant block to the hotel.

For a moment, Kitty stood there. The next instant she was racing out the back way and along the deep, dry gulley that cut behind the buildings. At the end of the street, she ran across, and into the deserted hotel.

She had been there before. Behind the stairs, was a side door that opened directly into the saloon. Pulling it open a bit, she peered into the room, brightly lighted by the gleaming glass chandelier with its dangling prisms.

The First Nugget was crowded. Every man stood still; at the card-table, not a player moved. There were no dancers in the hall beyond.

The long, polished bar ran along Kitty's side of the room. Midway down it, her father and brothers faced the bald-headed bartender.

"I said," Hellbender was speaking with deliberation, "that we're thirsty after our trip and we don't aim to drink alone. Set 'em up for the house."

The bartender shoved an unopened bottle and glasses to the bar. An angry rumble of low voices ran over the crowd. Then Jared Elder strode forward, stopped along side Hellbender.

"Take your drinks and start travelin' Beeson!" he rasped. "You and yours ain't welcome!"

KITTY'S HANDS clenched to become small, hard fists. She wanted to run in there and face Jared Elder, beat at him, for daring to speak to her father like that.

"We ain't leavin' here," Hellbender roared, "till every man-jack in the house has drunk to the successful landin' of the Seven-up cattle at the Junction tomorrow. Drink, you damn buzzards, or. . . ." He whirled, faced them, hands tense above his holsters. His sons did likewise; all but Eli, who waited to take a gun from the hands of Baldy, the barkeep.

There was a lunge forward, toward the dark men lined up at the bar. Hellbender's gun blazed, and splinters were kicked up from the floor, ahead of the charging men. Guns leaped into hands. . . . Then, between the two groups, suddenly stood the red-headed editor—squarely between their guns. Kitty's heart came into her throat; she pulled the door open a little more, but nobody noticed.

Jared's voice rang out: "Stop—everyone! If you don't, there'll be bloodshed, killin'."

"They won't all be on our side, them killin's!" cried out a tall, gangling man whom Kitty recognized as Twill Currey, half owner of the Bar-B. "Anyway, this ain't your put-in, Elder."

"Maybe not, but I feel responsible," Jared returned. "And—"

"Let him do his talkin' through his lyin', double-crossin' newspaper!" another man cried. "The country can get along without the Beesons. Let's clean 'em out."

Again they lunged forward, but Jared held his ground, standing there before the Beesons, both guns in hand. "Stand back! I'll take care of these men if you'll give me a chance. I'll see that the sheriff gets them. . . ."

"Get out of our way!" Currey yelled. "This is our party! We want 'em—alive!"

For the first time in her eighteen years Kitty Beeson knew real fear. Her blood felt like ice in her veins. She looked at her father. With a great shock, she saw that her own fear was reflected on his dark, handsome face, as he looked upon his sons. Suddenly he spoke with low authority, but Kitty caught the words.

"When there's a chance, you boys get back to camp! I'll follow. Do as I say!" Hellbender said in answer to their quick scowls. "Ready, now!"

Another flame belched from Hellbender's gun. Straight toward the chandelier it streaked, and the bullet bored into the high hook that held the mammoth glass contraption. There was a tinkle of glass, the sound of rending wood. Hellbender leaped, jerking Jared aside, as the huge, crystal-prismed affair crashed sickeningly to the floor.

In the darkness, there was an instant's silence before guns began to bark. Orange flames spat out in a criss-crossing pattern of fury between the Chula ranchers and the Beesons. Smoke curled, filled the air with an acrid, choking stench. The terrorized howl of the bald-headed bartender rose through the din, but it couldn't drown out the rancher's battle cry:

"Get 'em! Clean out the Beesons! Kill 'em!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Heartbreak Death Trap

KITTY'S BREATH came in painful, tearing gasps as she crouched in the doorway, straining her eyes through the darkness. Then, all at once, she could see the struggle. The oil lamp was burning, the glow growing brighter. The Beesons were backing toward the door where Kitty huddled. Fighting shoulder to shoulder was the red-headed editor, their enemy.

Kitty drew away as the seven men backed around the bar, through the door. Karl came first, his sleeve damp with blood. Kitty started forward, but Ben, from the doorway, caught her twin brother and be-

gan wrapping his neckerchief tightly above the wound.

"All of you, streak!" Hellbender ordered over his shoulder. "Do as I say—*move!*"

When he spoke in that tone of voice, the boys did not hesitate. They piled along the hall, out of the door. An instant later, Kitty heard the sound of pounding hoofs.

Hellbender and Jared backed into the hall, slammed the heavy oak door and bolted it.

"Come on!" Jared rasped. "You're comin' with me. I'm lockin' you in my office till the sheriff comes. It's the one way out of this! We'll streak out the back way!"

"No!" Hellbender's gun was drawn. Jared's fist shot out, struck straight into the big man's face, and Kitty saw her father literally lifted off his feet, to fall with a crash.

There was a shot beyond the heavy door, the splintering of wood. The sound of pushing and heaving came from the other side—and, above all, the crackling of flames, and the thin voice of Baldy begging somebody to help him put out the fire.

Kitty ran over to Jared. "You beast! You—"

"Kit!" her father gasped. "Kit!"

Jared looked at her. "Get back to the *Bugler* office!" he ordered, "and put out the light in back! Somebody in that saloon'll be rememberin' they can come around and catch us here in the hall. We've got to get out!"

Kitty stared at him, fighting something within herself; something that wanted her to do as this man willed, in spite of her father, her family, or anything else on earth. Then she saw her father, his jaw bleeding, staggering to his feet.

"You dare to treat my father this way!" she cried. "I'll ride after the boys, bring them back!"

She whirled, ran down the hall, out the door. She looked wildly around. Her own horse was behind the *Bugler* office, but Jared's gray was here. She ran across, tugged with jerky fingers at the hitch-knot, mounted.

She heard Jared's shout and Twill Quezzy's battle cry from inside the burning saloon. "Trap 'em in the hall, boys!"

There was a round of gun-music. Something stung across Kitty's side. The gray reared. Kitty used her spurs, and he lunged forward. She rode down the street like a mounted devil. Before the church, she glanced back over her shoulder, saw the light go out in the *Bugler* office. That meant that Jared had her father there. Well, Hellbender wouldn't be there long. Kitty vowed silently; not any longer than it took the boys to come back and get him.

Her violet eyes were wide with desperation as she backtrailed toward the forks. It had seemed like a reckless, wild lark to the Beeson's, driving their cattle to market over forbidden land, but it had turned into grim war. The ranchers were on the prod, filled with blood-lust. Death rode Chula trails this night.

For the first time in all her life, Kitty doubted her family; wondered if they were in the right, bringing all this trouble to the valley.

The burning saloon glowed in the sky as Kitty rode on, until the night breeze felt suddenly cold against her side. Her jacket was damp. Back at Sun Dance a bullet had grazed her side, but that couldn't matter. She had to ride on to the Canyon. She had to fetch her brothers back.

The world was a nightmare that she had to dream through. As she sent the gray along, she thought of her father, of the fear she had glimpsed on his face, as he looked at his sons. Kitty understood. Hellbender had not been afraid for himself, but for the boys he had led into danger. He loved his children. He had chosen his brand to tell the world proudly, that when he and his children rode over the range they were "seven up."

Kitty thought of Jared the traitor, whose

(Continued on page 100)

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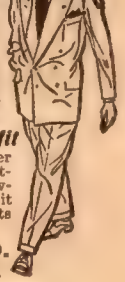

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(Continued from page 98)

kisses still burned on her lips, dizzying her; whose arms had held her so tightly. She was slumping over the saddle now. With a start, she realized that she was fast growing weak from loss of blood. Shaking her head to clear away the fog, she looked around, saw the light of a ranch house close by. The Half-Moon brand was burned into the lane gate posts. Vaguely, Kitty recalled that it was an enemy outfit.

The door opened. A woman, with her dark hair in two long braids, appeared in the lighted square. She was a young woman, lovely, with worry etched on her oval, tanned face, and haunting the dark eyes.

"What is it? she called. Then, "You come from Jared? You're riding his horse."

Kitty could only whisper. "Jared. . . . Jared!" And the heavy blanket of weariness came down to smother her.

WHEN SHE OPENED her eyes, she was lying on a bed in a small lean-to. Across the room was a crib and, in it, a sleeping child. Kitty's side was bandaged, the blood washed away. Through the doorway she could see the woman—little more than a girl—bending over a stove.

Kitty's thoughts began to straighten. This was the Half-Moon Ranch; the woman was Virginia Moon, Clancey's widow, whom Jared Elder so often came to see.

Virginia looked up, saw that Kitty was conscious. "Oh, I'm so glad!" She came into the lean-to. "I was afraid for you; you'd lost so much blood."

"It doesn't matter," Kitty said quickly. "I've got to ride on. It's a matter of life and death."

"Jared?"

Kitty hesitated. She dared not let Virginia know she was a Beeson. She had to get away. "Yes," she lied. "An errand for him."

"I'll get some hot coffee," Virginia said, "and some warm soup."

The coffee did give Kitty strength. Encouraged, she tried to eat the soup, but her spoon dropped back when a voice called from the kitchen door.

"Virginia! Let me in!" It was Deke Dart.

"He mustn't know I'm here!" Kitty whispered. "For Jared's sake!"

Virginia nodded, drew the lean-to partially shut, then hastened to open the outer door. Kitty could hear every word plainly.

"Virginia, we're usin' your house for headquarters again this year," Deke said as he came in. "Knew you wouldn't care."

"But I do care!" Virginia cried. "You met here last year, and when Clancy came home again—he was brought in, dead!"

"I know, girl. That's range war. And sometimes it takes war to end war, though I'm hopin' to end this without bloodshed. There come some of the boys now!"

Hoof beats sounded in the lane. A minute later, Kitty, crouched back, was listening to two new voices in the kitchen. Twill Currey and Ed Blake, his partner in the Bar-B, had come.

"Where's the rest?" Deke asked sharply. "It's growin' toward midnight, and they all ought to be here."

"They won't all come," Currey said. "Had a quick meetin' down in Sun Dance tonight, after a ruckus there, and switched plans."

"What right did you have to do that?" Deke demanded hotly. "I'm head of the Protective League. Our plans was all made!"

"Things happened, and you wasn't around," Currey returned. "Hell popped in Sun Dance tonight. The Beesons rode into the First Nugget, and started it." Quickly he told of the fight, the fire. "Jared Elder's gone over to the other side, all right. He fit for the Beeson's, helped 'em to get away. He even turned loose old Hellbender, hisself, instead of handin' him over to the sheriff."

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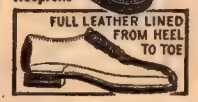

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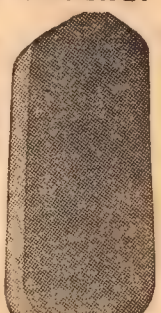

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"Is the sheriff in Chula?" Deke asked.

"Not even a deputy," Ed Blake growled. "And it's a good thing. We don't want the law. All we want is to clean out the Beesons and save our homes. Blake and me'll be plumb ruined, if they make the drive across the Bar-B this year."

"What are your plans?" Deke asked after a moment's silence.

"We're dividin' into three parties," Currey explained. "One bunch had already rid across your Arrow-D, and they're goin' to climb up to the rimrock above the Seven-up camp. They'll be staked out with rifles there. When they get the signal, at midnight—three shots fired from below—they're goin' to open fire down on the bunch."

Kitty put her hand over her mouth to stop the scream that welled to her throat. Her hands trembled as she began pulling on her jacket. She had to get away, had to reach her family and warn them—before it was too late.

DEKE DART BETRAYED no emotion. "What of the other two parties?" he wanted to know.

"One's ridin' up through the middle of Chula. They'll string across the mouth of the canyon, to catch any Beesons that may escape the riflemen above. The rest of the men'll all meet here, and then we'll ride across to join the others. All three have been fannin' out, tryin' to catch that damn red-headed editor that's sold us out to the Beesons."

"Are you sure Jared Elder did that?" Virginia wanted to know.

"Of course, we're sure," Ed Blake answered. "While we was havin' our meetin', after the fire was put out, Jared got out some hand-dodgers askin' us to hold off war—to give the Seven-up a chance. . . . After he'd had us organize and get ready to meet 'em!"

"Jared wants to prevent range war,"

Virginia cried. "He thought the Beesons would see reason—if they knew you were organized. Oh, it seems as if I couldn't bear it, to have all that fighting again! I'll never forget it—Clancey being brought in . . . ." Her voice broke.

In the bedroom, Kitty felt a lump in her own throat. The doubt of her family had grown to full belief now. She knew they were wrong, selfish. To have their own way, they had brought suffering, death, to these others. No wonder the men like Twill Currey and Ed Blake were worked up to a frenzy. She'd have to reach her father, make him see reason. . . .

"You'd no right to change the plans," Deke was shouting. "You—"

"Right or wrong, it's done," Currey said shortly. "And this night will settle things for good—with the Beesons, and that red-headed traitor. We'll all feel better when his carcass is hangin' to some likely limb."

"You'll be sorry for this night's work!" Deke said furiously. "I'll try to patch things up, but whatever happens'll be laid to your door, and don't forget it!"

The door slammed behind him, and Kitty knew a moment's relief. Deke was friendly to her folks; he'd ride to warn them. But that wouldn't do any real good, she realized. The news would only stir her father and brothers to greater anger, to more fighting lust. She, herself, had to go. . . .

Virginia spoke outside the bedroom door, "Twill, I can't bear to have any part in it, remembering Clancy. I'm going to my boy."

"Go ahead, Virginia. But remember, Clancy's score will be paid by mornin', and you'll feel better that it's done."

Virginia's face was ashen; her eyes troubled; as she came into the lean-to, shut the door, and faced Kitty. "You heard?" she said.

"Yes. That's why I've got to go. I can stop the war, if I can reach Mirage Canyon. I'm Kitty Beeson. Dad will listen to

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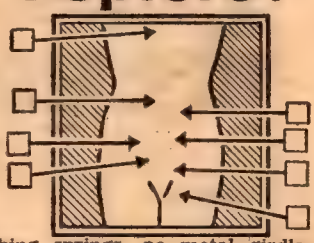

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me. I can make him see how wrong he is. Ben will help me. Oh!" As Virginia stayed silent. "I know you hate me! I don't blame you!"

Virginia spoke. "I don't hate you, Kitty Beeson. Listen!" Her voice was barely audible. "Last year, when I heard Clancy was missing, I rode out, too!" She stopped, shivering. "I found him down in Coyote Coulee, on the Bar-B. Clancy was dying," she whispered, "but there was a man with him, helping him. It was Ben. He'd stayed, knowing he'd be killed if any of the ranchers came upon him there."

"Ben's like that," Kitty nodded.

"I know it now, but I was mean to him then. When he rode down, twice afterwards, I sent him away and I wish I hadn't now. . . . But I've never forgotten the hurt in his eyes. And since then, I've waited—"

Kitty remembered Ben, a little bewildered and melancholy, this past year; as though he was carrying a heart heavy with gnawing pain.

"Virginia, bandage my side tighter," she said. "Help me get started. It's the only way we can save—the men we love."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Ranch Girl Rides to War

KITTY bit her lips against the pain of her side, as she followed Virginia cautiously through the side window.

"Kitty, I ought to go, instead of you," Virginia whispered, as she brought up Jared's gray. "Please let me, Kitty."

Kitty shook her head. She mounted. "You've got your boy. And perhaps you can delay the men's start."

She swayed faintly in the saddle. Gathering up the reins, she walked the horse around the cabin, over a knoll and out of sight. Just beyond, she cut into a trail where she could send the horse at a run.

She rode off the Half-Moon and onto the

Lazy-J. Weakness threatened her, and she fought it off, urging the gray faster. Once, shouts told her that the Half-Moon group had started. She strained her ears for sounds that might tell of Jared's capture. Her heart was a welter of pain when she thought of the man she loved in such dire danger, because he had worked for what he knew was right.

On a rise in the Bar-B trail, she saw, silhouetted against the night sky, the band coming from Sun Dance; they were spread out, searching for Jared. They would cut her off, if she kept to the trail.

The trail swerved. She left it, cutting straight across toward the gap that marked Mirage Canyon. The going was rough, but the gray was sure-footed.

Suddenly the horse drew up, and she saw a shallow, steep-sided coulee. Sickened, Kitty realized she had come too far. This was Coyote Coulee. She must backtrail, lose more precious time! The gray whinnied and it was answered by a horse in the coulee, above the bend. Kitty jerked up her head, listened. She heard the uneasy bawling of cattle in the coulee. And to the breeze came Jared's voice.

Dismounting, Kitty ran toward the rim, stopped as his words came clear. "This is just about what I expected to find," Jared said crisply. "All the valley cattle gathered here, ready to run off during the excitement of the Seven-up drive. It's the same thing Clancey Moon stumbled on last year!"

"Yes!" a strange cowboy retorted menacingly. "And sump'n happened to Clancy. Even for an editor, you've snooped too far!"

"Maybe!" It was Jared again. "But you men and your boss are goin' to be in a hell of a fix to explain these cattle. For there ain't goin' to be any Seven-up drive! You've kinda tripped up."

A moment's tense silence, then the cowboy spoke again: "Through shootin' off your mouth? If you have—"

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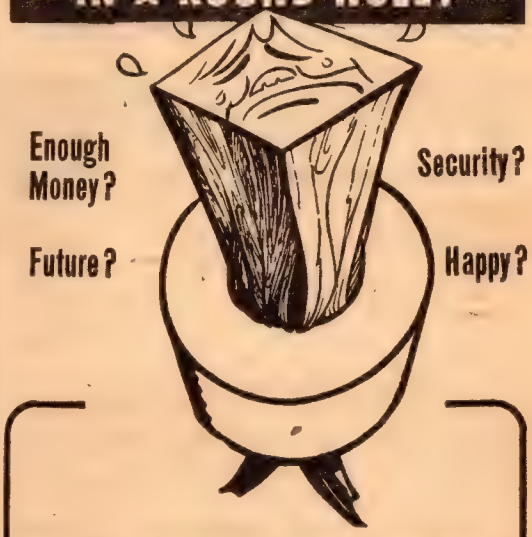

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Kitty tried to scream out a warning as she saw the two figures slinking around on either side of Jared. But there wasn't time. The cowboy who had been speaking leaped through the air, straight upon Jared. At the same time, the other two jumped from the sides.

Jared went down under the weight of the three. Kitty strained her eyes through the darkness, trying to make out Jared in that rolling, cursing, panting jumble of men. There was the thud of fists upon flesh, groans, curses. One man rolled over and lay quiet. Another rose, beating off two others. He stood swaying, arms flailing.

Kitty gave a sob of joy when the moon caught, for a moment, the gleam of red hair. Jared was holding them off!

Joy died again. Kitty hadn't noticed that other figure, cat-stepping down the coulee, behind Jared, until an arc of steel gleamed. A gun butt thudded heavily against the red head, and Jared slumped into the dirt.

Kitty's knees gave; her heart was a beating throb of misery. Nothing mattered now. Jared was dead.

DIMLY SHE HEARD the cowboy's voice, "Nice job, seein' as how we didn't dast have shootin' to bring anybody. And he's the son-of-a-gun that's been makin' all the trouble."

"Shut up! That fightin' fool would have got you if I hadn't come along!" That was Deke Dart. "Lucky I did, the League's goin' to wipe out the Seven-up right in camp, which leaves us high and dry with the cattle. But we got an out now. We'll claim the editor was in cahoots with the Beesons, holdin' the rustled cattle for the drive. We caught him in the act. He ain't dead—" the words made Kitty's heart beat madly again—"so you boys string him up, when the fightin' starts above."

Jared was alive! Kitty forced her benumbed knees to lift her, to carry her over

to the gray mount. She'd reach her father and brothers, warn them, and bring them to save Jared. There was still hope.

She mounted. The gray whinnied again, loudly this time, and again was answered by some horse in the coulee.

But an instant's wait brought no sound that told the man below had noticed. She turned the horse back along the coulee rim—to find her path blocked by Deke Dart. He had climbed up the coulee side on foot!

He reached for the bridle. Raising her quirt, Kitty brought it down across his arm. In the same instant, she spurred the gray, and went flying along the coulee.

Above the sound of her own mad flight, she could hear the Half-Moon men coming. Closer, she heard hoofbeats down in the coulee. Deke was coming after her! Somewhere ahead, the coulee trail would cut into the main one. Deke was trying to cut her off!

Sobbing, praying, Kitty bent over the horse's neck, urging him on. She gained the trail first, raised her head to look around. It was about a mile to the pass. It would be a race—a race with her weakness, as well as with Deke Dart—and she had to win. But Jared's gray was already slowing up. Behind her, Deke was a growing shadow. He would catch her, and then there would be no way to save her family and Jared.

A drumming sound caught her ear. To the east, the Sun Dance cattlemen broke over a ridge, to spread across the Bar B. Kitty no longer thought of them as nesters. They were men, fighting for their homes—decent, courageous cowmen.

She turned her horse straight toward that group of men. It was the only way. They had to believe her.

A bullet from behind fanned her cheek. Another clipped up the dust beside her. Deke would rather kill her than have her reach those ranchers!

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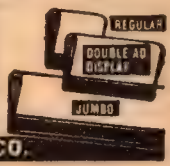

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She'd never make it! Three or four of the men ahead left the others and came toward her. Moonlight glimmered on the guns in their hands. Another shot from behind plowed across the gray's flank. That saved Kitty from Deke's hands. For the sting of it roused the lagging horse to greater speed, jerking Kitty forward. Her hat fell off, showing the golden hair that glimmered in the moonlight. Straight up to the group, with their ugly drawn guns, the horse carried Kitty.

A rancher spoke. "A gal! By guminy it's a gal! And Deke's shootin' at her!"

"Hell, and I almost hit her!" Deke shouted, in mock humiliation. He rode up. "I thought it was Elder. It's his horse."

Deke and two of the other men dismounted as they gathered about her horse. Kitty knew Deke wanted to be sure he had firm footing if it came to a shoot-out.

"It's Beeson's gal," one of them said, peering at her closely. "Where's Jared Elder, miss. How come you ridin' his hoss?"

Kitty found her breath at last, summoned all her strength. "I've got to. . . . Oh, I've got to reach my father—"

"So that's it!" put in Deke Dart, still holding his sixgun. "She's been tryin' to reach her folks and warn 'em. Well, I'll take care of her till the fight's over. We can't let her stay here."

"Wait!" Kitty gasped, as Deke caught her bridle rein. "Wait! You've got to listen!"

"Let's stop palaverin'!" Deke said roughly. "The girl's tryin' to gain time, while Elder and her folks put over somethin'. Here come the Half-Moon boys, and the rest are on the rimrock waiting for our signal. Let's get started."

He raised his sixgun, fired into the air the signal shots. *One! Two! Three!*

THERE WAS A moment's silence, then a fusilade of rifles, echoing and re-echoing between the high canyon walls,

above the bellowing of frightened Seven-up cattle. Deke swung back into his saddle and tried to jerk Kitty away, but she quirted his hand and wheeled her horse into the midst of the tense group that was waiting to catch any Beesons who might escape that other fire.

Heartsick, faint with weariness and despair, Kitty drooped over the gray's neck. Her thoughts were a dizzying, whirling chaos. Her father and her brothers were being shot down without a chance. Jared might be meeting death this instant, branded a rustler.

She dug her spurs into the gray. She would go back to Jared, fight for him—or die with him. The gray lunged, but Deke's hand caught him, held him down. Kitty met Deke's gaze, saw the cold fury in his eyes. Death was in that gaze! As surely as if he had said it. Kitty knew that Deke would kill her, to wipe out all who knew his secret.

"Well, I'll be damned for a sheepherder!" Twill Currey suddenly exclaimed. Then a strained silence fell over the crowd.

Kitty looked up, gave a cry of relief. For there, riding out of the canyon, came Hellbender Beeson, his five sons, and the rest of the Seven-up outfit. Every one alive! They must have started down the canyon before the men above opened fire.

Deke lifted his gun, but Twill Currey's fist shot out and knocked it from his hand. "You can't shoot now!" he rasped.

The other men nodded, on their horses tensely waiting. Not another gun was lifted, for every one of the Seven-up men, from Hellbender down to the last rider, held his hands aloft!

It was surrender—from the Beesons, who had never backed an inch from any man!

They stopped, and Hellbender spoke: "Men, I'm here in peace. We'll drive our cattle up the canyon in the mornin', and it'll be the last time we come this way.

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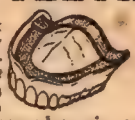

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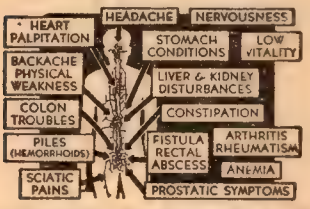

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I promise that. You see—" Kitty knew the shame that ate him, but his head was high, his voice steady—"I reckon I grew up, there in the saloon tonight, when I realized I'd led my boys into danger of death, just because I wanted to have my way. That's why Jared Elder turned me loose—so's I could reach my boys and stop the drive. The young editor had my word on it."

Kitty sent the gray forward, too quickly for Deke to stop her. "Dad! Jared's a prisoner in Coyote Coulee! Deke Dart's men are going to kill him!"

"He's got it comin'!" Deke shouted. "We caught him red-handed. He's holdin' all the Chula cattle in that coulee, plannin' to run 'em off durin' the drive. He didn't know the Beesons would turn yellow on him. But we got the damned coyote!"

"Wait! You've got to listen!" Kitty's voice rose high, clear, though she was shivering from the weakness that gripped her. Her yellow hair streamed back from her white face. Her eyes were wide, haunted. "Deke's lying to you. I heard him there. Deke and his men stole those cattle, as they did last year, planning to lay the blame on dad again."

ORANGE FLAMES spurted from Deke's gun—harmlessly into the air. His arm was suddenly crimson. Hellbender's hands had jerked down. He had fired from the hip, and smashed Deke's wrist with the bullet.

"Come on, you damned hellion!" Hellbender's recent meekness was forgotten, as he took charge of the affair. "Two of you watch Deke, till I'm ready to finish him. No man fires on my girl—guilty, or not guilty. The rest of you come on!"

Chula cowmen and Seven-up men thundered away in a cloud of dust, leaving Kitty to follow on the tired gray.

Sobbing with a terrible fear, Kitty rode to the spot where she could look down upon the scene. The dark figures of men were

down there, talking loudly. Ranchers or rustlers, she didn't know which had been victorious.

She rode slowly forward, when another rider came to meet her. Her father!

"Dad! Dad!" she choked. But she couldn't ask the question in her heart—the question about Jared.

"It's all right, honey. None of the boys hurt much. But you. . . ." Alarm crept into his tones. "There's blood on your jacket! You've been shot, Kittimount!"

"I'm all right." The wound was of no importance now.

Her brothers had come up, their faces grave with concern, but her desperate eyes, searching their number, didn't find the red-headed, young, fighting editor in the group.

Her gaze fell upon Ben. She put out her hand. The touch of his hand seemed to free her voice. "Ben, Virginia wanted to warn you. She's waiting at the Half-Moon."

"I'm startin' for there right now!"

"Jared? He's—"

"He's comin', Kittimount!" Hellbender said, kissing her tenderly. "He can take care of himself, that editor from Sun Dance. He's been givin' Dart's men a whale of a tussle, by the looks of 'em, or we'd have been too late. Fightin' fool, is right. Here he is." Then, to the red-headed figure who approached, "The girl's hurt some, Jared. Mebbe you'll carry her to the nearest ranch and—and sort of look out for her."

Kitty didn't hear any more. Jared had picked her up and was striding toward his horse. There was no need of words between them, but they spoke the things in their hearts, to hear the full glory of their music.

"I love you, Kitty. . . . I love you!"

"Jared, I'll always love you."

The moon threw off a dark blanket of clouds and stepped out to shine upon a friendly valley, upon a range war that was no more, upon the fighting fool from Sun Dance, who carried the girl he loved in his arms. ♥ ♥ ♥

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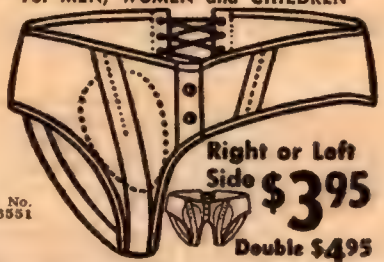

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(Continued from page 8)

So don't forget us! We want lots of letters!

ANNA MARIE PRESTON
Box 104
Midvale, Idaho

ELLEN ROBERTS
Midvale, Idaho

Korean Corporal

Dear Editor:

Here's a plea from a lonely GI now serving in Korea. This is my first try at Pen Pards and I hope it brings me lots of letters. I promise to answer every one I receive.

I am 23 years old, 5 ft. 10 in., have brown hair, blue eyes, weigh about 165 lbs. Would like to hear from anyone regardless of their age. Will be glad to exchange snapshots.

CPL. WALTER SONIKE US 55122788
Co. B 724th TROB
APO #301 C/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

"Cozy" of Texas

Dear Editor:

Do you think a poor lonesome telephone operator from Texas might succeed in getting in Pen Pards? Hope so! As I said, I'm from Texas. In fact, I've never been out. I'm 18 years old, 5 ft. 8 in., and weigh 150 lbs. I have blue eyes and brown hair. I'm a grass widow and have two of the sweetest sons in the world. They stay with my aunt in a nearby town, so I get awfuly lonely and have oodles of time to answer letters.

So, come on all you people, everywhere. I promise an answer to every single letter I receive.

COZETTE GRESHAM
1241 No. 5th
Abilene, Texas

Alaskan Serviceman

Dear Editor:

I am writing for myself and a friend of mine. We are both in the air force. We would like to make some pen pards. We are very lonely and have had no social life since we've been in the service, other than just a home visit. Please enclose snapshots.

A/2C DAVID L. CORBETT
500st Supply Sqdn.
APO 731 c/o Postmaster
Seattle, Washington

A/3C FRED BELCHER
Headquarters Squadron Section
566th Air Base Group
Hamilton Air Force Base
Hamilton, California.

PEN PARDS

G. I. Bob

Dear Editor:

I am writing to ask you if you would please print my plea for pen pals in your department. I am a soldier stationed at Ft. Benning, Ga. I am 6 ft. tall, weigh about 150 lbs., and have brown hair, blue eyes—I am 27 years old.

I like just about all outdoor sports and my hobbies are writing and receiving letters. I will exchange photos with anyone who wishes to, and I promise to answer all letters I receive.

Would like to hear from anyone who wants to answer. I'll be waiting by the mail box.

PFC. ROBERT J. WILSON (E.R.)
44044555—27th Transportation Car Co.
Ft. Benning, Ga.

Collects Post Cards

Dear Editor:

Here I am trying my luck at Pen Pards, I'll start off by saying I'm a postcard collector, interested in exchanging cards with lots and lots of people of any age. I have postcards from Georgia, several from Tennessee, New York, Mississippi, Florida, and Delaware to exchange, and lots of cards from Italy, Africa, Australia, France, Japan, Germany, England, Switzerland, and South America. I'm 16 years old, weigh 109 lbs., am 5 ft. 2 in. tall, with blue eyes and brown hair.

BARBARA WHITE
Route One
Ranger, Ga.

That's all the room for this issue, friends, but we'll be back this way again. So do keep your letters coming to Pen Pards, c/o RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York. Until next time—hasta la vista!

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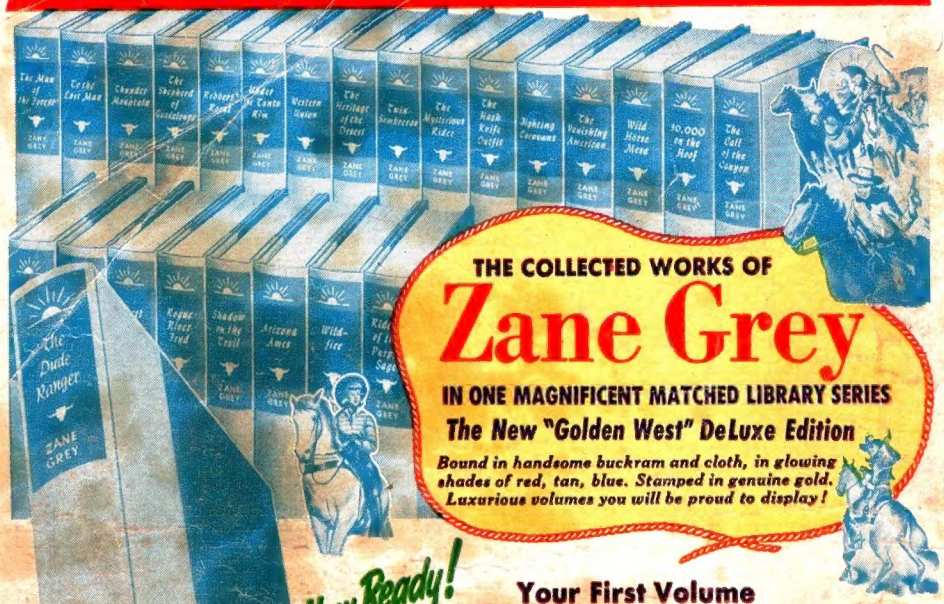

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